

The Hokage Great and Terrible

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What if someone other than Namikaze Minato had been chosen to be the Yondaime? Things might have worked out very, very differently. AU, a bit dark and a bit tragic. A little Naru X Hina

Status: complete

Published: 2007-10-27

Updated: 2008-03-30

Words: 26341

Chapters: 13

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Tragedy - Characters: Naruto U., Minato N. - Reviews: 245 - Favs: 513 - Follows: 236

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3858922/1/The-Hokage-Great-and-Terrible>

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The Hokage

The Lightning nin took cover behind some bushes. He was panting and scared. Ritana and Gobal were both dead. As soon as they had seen they were up against the Second Flash they had tried to break off and run, but it had been too late. He had chased them down and slaughtered them. His friends were gone and he was wondering if he would survive. The answer came to him when he felt a burst of wind and a flash of yellow and black. Before he could even act there was a stabbing pain in his back and he was thrown to the ground. He expected death to be immediate but to his surprise he was still breathing as he looked up. Standing in front of him was the Second Flash of Konoha; he was twelve and a miniature version of his father. He wore black trousers and shirt with a single stripe of orange running down the side. He had on a green Jonin vest and beneath his spiky blonde hair was the Leaf hitai-ite. His blue eyes and unmarked face were calm.

"Why?" Namikaze Naruto asked.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Why do you keep fighting when it's hopeless? Your village is gone and the Hokage rules this country now. Why won't you accept that? No one can defeat Konoha. If you would just accept resettlement you and the ninjas here could become citizens of the Leaf and have good lives."

The paralyzed Lightning nin did what he could, he spat at the one standing before him. "To hell with you! To hell with Konoha! And to the deepest darkest hell with your Hokage! We don't want to be leaf nins! We just want to be free and left alone!"

Naruto stared down at his opponent and ground his teeth. Why? Why wouldn't they understand it was all pointless? He'd come here with the army three years ago when the Hokage had destroyed the

Village Hidden in the Clouds. He'd seen it first hand, the true power of the Hokage. Against such might all resistance was futile.

"Why don't you wish to be a bird while you're at it? You have about as much chance at that."

"Go to hell!"

"Gee, I never heard that one before. But enough of this, I'll give you a choice. Do you want to die or be a prisoner?"

The Lightning nin shuddered, he'd heard the stories. "Please kill me."

Naruto nodded, not surprised. Very few rebels ever surrendered. He held out his palm and concentrated chakra. " **Four Winds Rasengan.**" He ended it quickly and cleanly.

He returned to his team. "All right let's finish up this patrol."

"You know you could have let us help." Sasuke complained.

"Oh Sasuke-kun I'm sure Naruto-sensei had his reasons." Sakura added cheerfully.

Naruto shrugged. "I wanted to ask the last one why they were fighting us when it was hopeless."

"Who cares?" Sasuke sounded bored. "They're foreigners, it's not like they can really ever be trusted."

Hearing that Naruto turned towards the third of his soldiers. "Any thoughts on that Haku?"

The boy merely offered Sasuke a friendly smile. "I would like to think I am as loyal as anyone else. I have lived in the village six years now and think of it as my home."

Sasuke looked embarrassed. "I wasn't talking about you, I know you're loyal. So are *most* of the ninjas who agreed to resettlement. But the ones who are fighting us have made their choice. They don't deserve any more chances."

Naruto frowned. "Even if they are enemies today they can become friends and allies one day."

Sasuke shook his head. "My brother doesn't think so; neither does anyone else in the Uchiha clan. My brother says we should begin Total Pacification here."

Naruto gave him a sharp look. " *Total Pacification* is a pleasant way of saying let's kill everyone; every man, woman, and child. It's *not* something to be hoped for."

Sasuke shrugged indifferently. "It worked in Wind country."

Naruto didn't like the cold blooded way Sasuke could talk about massacring millions. It also bothered him to see Sakura and Haku both nodding their agreement. What was happening when even relatively innocent Genins thought nothing about mass slaughter? "I was in Wind country during the last stages." He said quietly. "Take my word for this none of you want to see the things I have. This is your first two month tour of duty. Maybe after a few more of these you'll really start to understand what war is." He turned around, suddenly very tired of the conversation. "Come on let's move."

Namikaze Minato approached the Hokage Tower. He had been summoned to a meeting of the Circle by the Lord Hokage. As he moved towards his destination his eyes wandered up to the cliff wall. When he'd been a boy there had been three faces carved into it. The faces of the first three Hokages. They had seemed very impressive back in those days. He could still remember as a boy being amazed that anything could be so huge. The three faces were still there of course, but now they seemed insignificant. To their right was carved the visage of the fourth, or Yondaime, Hokage. *That* face was ten

times the size of the others and took up the entire cliff to the right of the original three. There was literally no more room for more faces. That had not been done by accident.

As always the Tower was crawling with ANBU. He counted a dozen outside and was sure there were even more of them inside. All of a sudden he felt a nostalgic for the old ANBU masks. In the old days each ANBU had painted his own mask in the form of the animal he felt best represented him. There was a certain style and individuality to them. Now all the ANBU seemed to be clones. They all wore the black robe above their armor and identical black death masks over their faces. The only difference he could see to any of them was the small number in red stamped into the forehead of each mask. The ANBU really seemed like men who had been reduced to mere numbers.

At the entrance he presented his identification papers. He found it more than a little annoying. His face was well known in the village and he had on the special hitai-ite which everyone also knew. Yet the ANBU insisted on checking everyone. When the ANBU had confirmed he was who he said he was he was allowed into the Tower. Even the Tower had changed; the Sandaime had met with people with a large but otherwise ordinary office. That was not enough for the Yondaime, oh no not even close.

He walked down the halls to the throne room. Beneath a twenty foot arched marble ceiling he fell to one knee and cast his eyes down upon the floor. The luxurious throne was empty of course; the Hokage *loved* making a grand entrance, so he would wait there on one knee until given permission to rise. He was the first member of the Circle to arrive. The Hokage would not appear until all the members were present.

The next to arrive was Jiraiya. He flashed his sensei a quick smile before turning his face back to the floor.

Then came Uchiha Itachi, head of the ANBU, the police force, and heir of the Uchiha clan. Itachi was a mystery to everyone, perhaps

even the Hokage. Since the death of Shisui, his best friend, he was known to be close to no one. He was efficient and cold and never questioned the orders he received.

Then came Momochi Zabuza and Hoshigaki Kisame. They came together as they usually did. Together Zabuza and Kisame were the either the greatest heroes or traitors to ever come from the Village Hidden in the Mist. Just as war was about to begin between Leaf and Mist they had assassinated the Mizukage and seized power. They had immediately negotiated a deal with the Hokage. The two of them were granted membership in the Circle, with all the accompanying privileges, and their village had been spared destruction. In return, the village had surrendered unconditionally and its ninjas had agreed to resettlement. Of all the other lands with a ninja village it was the only one not to have an insurgency. Of all the rival villages Mist was the only one not left a blackened ruin. The surrender had saved many thousands of lives and strengthened Konoha with fresh reserves of able shinobi. Of course there was another point of view that the two of them had stabbed their village and people in the back. Hero, traitor, traitor, hero, really wasn't it all just a point of view?

Next came his student Kakashi. The silver haired ninja gave him a quick nod before going to on knee. Minato was glad to see his former student here on time. It was annoying the way he would sometimes keep his subordinates waiting. Trying to do that with the Hokage was *dangerous*. Circle member or no.

Next came Tsunade. The leader of Konoha's medical corps took a knee in silence as had the others. But he could read the unhappiness or annoyance in her. Of all the Circle members she was the only one who would openly disagree with the Hokage. There was much she did not agree with and she had the courage to say so. He suspected that she and one other person could get away with that. Anyone else would be risking their lives.

Then came the other person who was known to disagree with the Hokage openly. He was the only one who was not a member of the Circle. He was the only one to ever decline membership. Sarutobi

did not have to kneel or stare at the ground. He sat down in a padded chair and quietly lit a pipe. It was odd to see how the Hokage acted around Sarutobi. It was nothing less than the activity of a child looking for parental approval.

Finally came the last member of the Circle. Anko walked past the others and knelt just before the dais. Before she did so she shot Tsunade and Sarutobi looks of annoyance. Anko was devoted to her Hokage mind, body, and soul. To her the Hokage was never wrong and could not be wrong. She loathed anyone who dared to question his wisdom or his genius. She acted as the Hokage's right hand and was the second most powerful person in Konoha. She could have *anyone* below Circle rank killed with just a word. She was also the one who ran the camps, and knew more of their dark secrets than anyone but her beloved Hokage.

Not surprisingly it was only a couple minutes after Ankos's arrival that the Hokage came. As was his flamboyant habit he appeared sitting upon his throne in a flash of fire.

"You may all rise and look upon me." Said a soft and amused voice. They all rose to their feet and gave their Hokage a bow. He was dressed in the gold and white robes of state and around his neck was the fiery gem of the Kitsune. Even standing twenty feet away Minato could sense its incredible chakra as well as its evil. On his feet he took a closer look at the other Circle members. They of course all wore the special hitai-ites that marked their status, the ones with the Leaf symbol within a circle of snakes. Without a word Anko immediately stepped up onto the dais and took her usual spot to her former sensei's right.

"Ku, ku, ku, I thank you all for coming here today." He smiled out at all of them. His eyes staying on Sarutobi just a bit longer than the rest. With one hand he idly stroked the gem as though it were a pet. With each touch Minato felt the chakra and aura of evil pulse stronger. "You eight who are known as the Circle of the Serpent are the ones I have favored above all others. With you few I have willingly shared all the gifts I have acquired since gaining control of

the Kyuubi kitsune." Perhaps it was just imagination but Minato could have sworn he heard an angry rumbling coming from somewhere. From the looks of some of the other faces in the room he was not the only one. "To you alone I have granted immortal life, I have granted eternal youth, perfect health, complete healing and regeneration, not to mention wealth and power greater than any lord's. Have I not been generous?" He paused and they all waited for him to continue. But instead he frowned. "I asked a question, have I not been generous?" His tone just a little sharp.

"Very generous! Orochimaru-sensei." Anko replied eagerly.

"Sure." Jiraiya said.

"You have." Minato said.

"Generous sure." Tsunade said.

"Yes you have Lord Hokage." Zabuza said.

"Extremely generous." Kisame confirmed.

"You are generous Hokage-sama." Kakashi drawled.

Itachi nodded ever so slightly but did not deign to speak. Sarutobi gave no reaction at all but simply continued to watch.

The Hokage tilted his head and smiled at them all. "Have I not been merciful?"

Again the question was met by general consensus that he had, though Minato and a few of the others might have wondered when the last time the word merciful had been used to describe the Yondaime.

The Hokage nodded apparently agreeing with their assessment of him. "Yessss, I have been most merciful and most generous. Yet one of you has betrayed me." There were gasps from most of them along with immediate pledges from them that they were completely loyal.

Only Sarutobi, Itachi, and Tsunade remained silent. Orochimaru's slitted eyes traveled along their faces as he took a firm hold of the gem. His eyes stopped on one of them.

"You are the traitor."

The traitor

"You are the traitor."

Zabuzza looked back in panic as the others moved away from him. "My Lord Hokage I assure you I am completely loyal to you."

Orochimaru smiled serenely. "As you were to the Mizukage?" He held the gem of the kitsune firmly in a fist. Red chakra flowed around him, fully covering him. "There is no point in denial your accomplice has already betrayed you."

Zabuzza shot a glance towards Kisame. "Sorry Zabuzza," the shark ninja said. "But there was never any way it was going to work."

"True," came the Hokage's lazy reply. "Even if you could somehow manage to steal the gem from me you have no idea how to work it. As for killing me, do you think that little sword you carry could actually end my life?" He laughed. "I am Orochimaru! I am immortal!" He directed his eyes back towards a very nervous Zabuzza.

"Please allow me to explain."

"By all means." Zabuzza was about to speak. "But not to me."

All at once Zabuzza's body shook and burst into flame. He howled in agony as he crumpled to the ground. The others in the room took further steps back. Orochimaru remained seated and enjoyed the spectacle. "If you feel the need to explain yourself you may do so to the death gods down in whichever hell will accept you." As the body continued to burn Orochimaru turned his attention elsewhere.

"Kisame, I wish to thank you for your service."

"My pleasure my Lord." He bowed.

"Good bye."

The Mist nin's face shot up and before any words could be spoken he too began screaming as his body burst into flame. The others stared at the Hokage. All of them wondered if they were next. Their fear was thick and palpable and seeing it pleased him.

"No need for the rest of you to worry. I never trusted either of them and this way is just simpler." He got up from his throne and approached the two piles of ash that were all that was left of them. "Now all my closest helpers are all Leaf nins." He gave all of them a wide and fearsome grin. "And I *know* I can trust all of you. That is all that I want from you, all I have ever wanted from you. I want your loyalty and to be able to trust you. A very small price for all that I have given to you." Reaching down into each ash pile he removed a minute sliver of crystal. Touching each to the gem they were instantly absorbed. "Well now we are all done for today. You may all leave now, except for you Sarutobi-sensei. I wish to speak with you for a bit."

Except for Sarutobi they all bowed and departed.

A pair of arrows came out of the forest. The ninjas all dodged and avoided them easily.

"So much for an easy rest of the day." Naruto sighed. "All of you wait here I'll deal with this."

Sasuke immediately jumped to his side. "Please sensei let me deal with it! I can handle this easily!"

Naruto's first instinct was to say no. This was their first patrol and he wanted to keep them safe while they learned what being ninja was really all about. But then he reconsidered. They would have to get their hands dirty sooner or later and the tour was up in a couple more days. He wasn't doing them any favors by keeping them all in glass cases. He nodded. "All right."

Sasuke grinned and jumped away before his sensei could change his mind. Sakura, not surprisingly rushed up to him worried. "Naruto-sensei are you really going to let him do this alone? I know Sasuke-kun is the best but what if he runs into more than he can handle?"

"Don't worry Sakura. If there were ninjas out there I'd be handling it. But I've been here before, those arrows probably came from one or two civilians." He shook his head. "They should know better by now but they never seem to learn."

Haku peered into the forest. "It seems that they now have."

In less than a minute Sasuke had finished the mission. He was leaping back out of the forest. Two trophies in one hand and a smile on his face. He came to a halt in front of his team and proudly dropped the two heads onto the ground. "There were only two of them; they were no problem at all."

"Very good job Sasuke." Naruto said as he took out a map.

"Oh Sasuke-kun I am so proud of you!" Sakura squealed, not put off in the least by the blood covering him or the presence of two severed heads a few feet away.

"How do you feel about killing people for the first time?" Naruto asked.

"No big deal, just like sheep." He said simply.

Naruto nodded and kept his thoughts to himself. The first time he's killed he'd been a little bit past his eighth birthday. He hadn't been able to sleep for a whole week. He'd heard about the new academy training methods. One being that each student was required to kill sheep with a kunai. The theory was that it would help the students deal with the reality of killing. Naruto had thought the theory that slaughtering a sheep was the same as slaughtering a man foolish, but now he had to wonder. From the look of things Sasuke was just fine with it.

"What are you doing sensei?" Sakura asked as she saw him studying the map.

"Looking for the nearest village."

"Why?" she asked.

It was Haku who answered. "He intends to carry out general order 4."

Sakura looked a bit embarrassed to have let that slip her mind. Sasuke by comparison seemed thrilled. "Great! More action. You are going to let us help aren't you sensei?"

Naruto nodded. "Of course it'll be good training. Now come on it's this way."

"I now have two openings within the circle Sarutobi-sensei. I could use someone I trust in one of those positions."

Sarutobi calmly puffed on his pipe as he answered. "Come now Orochimaru we both know that there is no one you really trust, not even your former student."

Orochimaru giggled. "Yesssss, that is true. But the members of the Circle are trusted more than any others.' He smiled. "After all, they have more to lose. Come now sensei, wouldn't you like to be young again? Wouldn't you like to wake up in the morning and not feel the ache in your bones? Would you not like to look at your image in the mirror and see a young healthy man staring back at you? Wouldn't you like to feel the same boundless energy that you once had? Would you not like to have unending days with which to study new jutsu? Why do you refuse the gifts that I offer you?"

"Because Orochimaru I am ninja."

Orochimaru frowned, he had never liked when his sensei tried to sound philosophical. "As am I, as are the rest of the members of the Circle."

Sarutobi shook his head sadly. "Then let us say I simply do not wish to pay the price for what you offer me."

"The only price I ask is loyalty to your Hokage. Are you not all ready paying that *price* ? It seems to me you are simply not getting the full value for what you pay."

"That may be Orochimaru, but I still do not desire the gifts you offer."

Orochimaru sighed and shook his head. Sarutobi was such a stubborn old fool, but he did love him. "Very well, I leave you to your *retirement*. When you finally realize the value of my offer you need only ask and I will grant it to you."

"Thank you Hokage-sama." He bowed and left the throne room.

Orochimaru watched him go with a smile, certain that eventually the old man would come to his senses.

They'd found a small village about two miles from where the attempted ambush had taken place. It was not much to look at. Just a little farming community. He counted twenty simple homes and estimated there might be perhaps a hundred people living here, if that. Naruto had no idea if either of the two men who had fired the arrows had come from here. But it didn't matter. It was bad enough that the few remaining ninjas were trying to fight the occupation. Civilian opposition was not going to be tolerated. He would carry out general Order 4 and hopefully get the message through to these people that fighting Leaf shinobi was a hopeless proposition.

He turned to his students. "Sakura and Haku I want you to circle around to the south end of the village and keep out of sight. When Sasuke and I herd them in that direction I expect you to catch them."

They both nodded and got moving without a complaint. "Sasuke I want you to use your fire jutsus and help me kill as many as we can and make the others run in the direction of the others."

"Got it sensei." Sasuke was eager.

Naruto took another look at their target. He saw three small children playing while a grandmother watched over them. He cringed inward. He hated this! He hated fighting people who he knew couldn't fight back and who were, probably, guiltless. But he'd been in the field long enough to know that you had to follow orders whether you liked them or not. That was the duty of a ninja and of a soldier.

Sakura's voice came over the radio communicator. "I am in position."

"I am also in position." Haku stated.

"Stand by we are about to commence." He turned to Sasuke. "Want to lead?"

Sasuke nodded eagerly. "Thank you sensei." He began casting a fireball jutsu.

Naruto gritted his teeth and reminded himself he was only following orders.

Minato sat in the rose garden on one of the wooden benches. He shut his eyes and breathed in the scent that filled the air. He loved this place. Whenever he was here he could reach out and embrace so many wonderful memories. This was where he had proposed to his wife, where he had taken his only son to play as he watched over him. Kushina was gone now and Naruto was far away in Lightning country for the time being. *You would be so proud of him my love. He has grown into a great shinobi and a good man.* He imagined how much she would have loved to have been there to watch Naruto grow and to have loved him. But she had not survived his birth. Minato had made sure to give Naruto love and attention and to make

sure his son never doubted just how very much he was treasured and loved. He loved his son so much it frightened him at times. There was nothing he would not do to protect his precious son. But now he was wondering just what he was saving his son for? What sort of life would he have as he got older? He was all ready a shinobi of the Leaf and he was considered by one and all to be a genius of the Namikaze clan. His future was bright. But would that future ever hold anything but war and death?

Looking about the rose garden it was easy to imagine all the world was as peaceful as this one spot on the Namikaze estate. It was easy to forget the horrors of the world. Horrors that Konoha and its Hokage had inflicted. Twelve years, twelve years of unending wars. Ever since the day the Hokage had saved the village from the nine tailed demon he had led them from one, 'necessary,' war to another. Each one seemed to promise a real and lasting peace just as soon as one last threat was annihilated. But there never seemed to be an end. Except perhaps now peace might finally be at hand. All the lands from the sea to the western mountains had been conquered and only in Lightning and grass was there still any resistance to the New Order. Once this last opposition was eliminated perhaps there really could be peace. After all who was left to threaten Konoha? Perhaps his son might get to enjoy what he'd only dreamed of, a life without constant war.

"I am very proud of all of you." Naruto said to them. Not surprisingly Sasuke just nodded his acknowledgement. Sakura blushed and squealed in delight at his praise. Haku smiled and thanked him. Naruto looked at the smoldering ruins of one more unimportant village that had been swallowed up in this war. The bodies were scattered all about. Some had been killed with kunai, some with senbons, some had burned, and some had been torn apart by wind. As a military operation it had been neat and clean. Looking at the bodies of the children he knew that in reality what had happened here was anything but clean. *I followed my orders that is all that matters.*

"All right let's get back to base camp I have a lot of paperwork to file on today's patrol." His students laughed at his distress and they quickly got moving.

The Circle

Tsunade headed home from the meeting. She was in no mood now to go back to the hospital. She felt absolutely no guilt about that. Since returning to the village ten years ago she had trained up an outstanding staff of doctors and medics. Things would run just fine without her there. She frowned at the memory of what had happened. Orochimaru was as much of a cold hearted bastard as ever. Killing Zabuzza was understandable, if he really was plotting treason that is. But Kisame's death had been pointless. She had never liked either of them, but she hated pointless death. *Do I ever have the wrong boss then!* She shoved that thought aside. Of course Orochimaru was a heartless bastard, he always had been. But like it or not she was in no position to complain. Bastard or not he was a unique genius and lacked the moral qualms that stopped others from pursuing things to their limit. She let herself smile as she entered the mansion.

"I'm home." She called out. Wondering if her husband was in.

"You're back early. Anything happen?"

At the sight of Dan's smile her heart skipped a beat. She went up to her darling husband and kissed him. "I'll tell you about it over dinner." No, she had no right to complain.

Jiraiya sank back into the hot tub and eyed the six girls who were in there with him. He couldn't recall their names, but what did it matter? One he thought was from right here, the rest were refugees from lands that Konoha now ruled. The beautiful young women were very grateful to be living in his palatial mansion and to be under his personal protection. This was the life, and he owed it all to the Hokage. When he was younger living like this would have caused a scandal. Now no one would dare question anything a member of the Circle might want to do. He didn't even have to leave the village

much anymore. The Hokage would occasionally have an assignment for him but more and more he was allowed to simply indulge his sensual side and play. He disagreed with some of the things his former teammate did, but tried not to think too much about them.

He smiled at his little harem. "Now who wants to give me a massage?" As they always did the girls fought one another for the honor.

Itachi looked out the bay window of his office. He had a very slight smile on his face; today's events had been amusing. If Zabuzza had truly believed he could simply steal the gem of the kitsune and kill Orochimaru then he really had deserved to die in fire. Not for treason but for unforgivable stupidity. He was glad to see Kisame gone as well, the fewer players in the game the better. Now there were only six Circle members and Sarutobi. He felt certain that in time he could manipulate and win over all of them except for Anko. Thinking of her he frowned. She was the main obstacle to his goal. As master of the ANBU and police force he was firmly entrenched in the number three position. His power superseded only by the Hokage and the Hokage's little pet. He loved challenges and wanted to test himself to his very limit. He would never be satisfied to be anything but the most powerful shinobi in all the land. But the game he played was a lethal one and one wrong move could be the end.

He shook his head. Zabuzza was an example, not that he needed one, of what could happen if you lacked patience or, even worse, trusted someone. His thoughts were his own. Years ago when he'd killed Shisui people had suspected him. He had been considering killing off his clan and escaping the village when the Hokage intervened. Not only had the Hokage squashed the investigation he had elevated him to command of the ANBU. It was then that he had realized that there was more than one way to test the limits of his abilities. He had continued to develop new jutsu and the power of his mangekyo sharingan. But he had also developed his intellect and sharpened his will in the pursuit of ultimate power. Being immortal he

now had the advantage of time in achieving his ultimate goal. First he needed to replace Anko as the Hokage's favorite and most trusted. That would not be easy; while Anko lacked a brilliant mind she had a keen sense of who might threaten her standing with her beloved Orochimaru-sensei. Any attempt to frame her or confront her directly was doomed to failure. No, he would need to demonstrate patience and slowly chip away at her position. He would magnify every little mistake she made. He would call into question any error in judgment. Orochimaru would not find that suspicious, on the contrary he would expect nothing else. In time he was sure he could expose Anko as the small minded drone he knew her to be.

Once in the prime position he would remain close to Orochimaru and wait for a moment of weakness. He had no idea when or how it might come, but it would come. And in that moment when Orochimaru was vulnerable he would strike with the full power of the sharingan. He would learn all the Hokage's secrets and finally be in a position to replace him. He understood that doing so might take quite some time, perhaps a hundred years or more. But he had time and he had patience, and what was more important he had the single minded desire to see just how much he was capable of.

Kakashi returned home. He'd been offered his pick of properties in Konoha but he preferred to live in the house where he'd grown up. When he got home he first made sure he was alone then went to the bedroom dresser. He pulled out the second drawer and took out the little orange book he'd hidden there. He was glad she hadn't found it yet. He shook his head, how did she keep finding them? It was like she could smell them. He took a look at his watch; she'd be working at the hospital for another couple of hours. He stretched out on the bed and started reading. He was still reading when he felt killer intent fill the room.

He looked up knowing he was caught red, well orange, handed. "Hi honey! How was your day?"

His wife glared at him and he felt the killer intent rise a couple notches. Tapping her foot she held out a hand. Like a naughty child Kakashi got up and handed her the book. She rolled it up and put it in one of her pouches, she would burn it later. "Why do you keep reading these things? And don't tell me it's because Obito keeps giving them to you! No one makes you accept them!" Rin demanded.

He lowered his mask and tried to give her a kiss. But her growl kept him from getting to close. "I just find them entertaining." He said sheepishly. Now where would he hide them?

Rin shook her head. She looked to be all of sixteen, the same age she'd been when she'd died in Wind country. That was all right as Kakashi looked to be eighteen. He would actually have liked to have had both of them look a little older, but he didn't complain. Obito was stuck as a thirteen year old though he'd developed the habits and attitudes of a teen.

"Obito is coming over for dinner tonight but I swear I should tell him to never set foot here again!"

"Oh come on dear don't be like that!" Kakashi pleaded. He gave her the puppy dog eyes. Since having the sharingan removed and a normal eye put back he had found he was better able to express himself. The Hokage had not been pleased with his decision to remove the sharingan. But he would not keep it and leave Obito with only one. There were limits even to the wonders that the Hokage could work. One of them being that when someone returned to life they were brought back to the physical age they had been at the time of death. That was the age they remained at; they did not grow older or younger, though they did enjoy perfect healing and regeneration. Another limit was that body parts removed prior to death remained lost. Though it meant he was less effective Kakashi returned the 'gift' his friend had given him.

At the sight of his sad face Rin could just not stay angry. Despite herself she gave her husband a grin. "Fine, but will you stop reading these things?"

"Sure."

"Liar." She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. "Dinner will be ready in an hour." He nodded and began to wonder if she ever looked in the attic.

Anko stripped off her clothes and slipped beneath the covers of the large bed. She lay there and waited anxiously for him. Her heart was pounding a thousand miles a minute. Though they had made love many, many times each time she felt that same excitement and rush. He only asked for her once or twice a month, and tonight had been one of those rare unexpected surprises. He'd looked at her and smiled, sending her heart racing, and told her he wanted her tonight.

It did not bother her that they were intimate so rarely. She had discovered long ago that his appetites were not those of common men. She accepted that gladly, one could not be unique in so many ways and be held to the same mundane standards as everyone else. She never asked him about other pleasures; she took what he gave her and received it gladly. She loved and adored him with every fiber of her being. To her he was everything; teacher, father, brother, lover, friend, and lord. She understood that he did not love her in the same way that she loved him. Orochimaru was a man ruled by his passions, and he refused to let any single passion gain ascendancy over the others. But, in his own way, he cared for her. Knowing that was enough to fill her heart with joy.

The bedroom door opened and *he* entered and smiled at her. He began to slowly peel back his robes. "Little Anko." He said softly.

"My love." She said in response. *I am yours.*

"What's wrong dear?" She asked seeing him pick at his food.

"I tried to see Shizune again." Dan answered cheerlessly.

Tsunade frowned. "I wish you would stop doing that. It's bad enough that I let her have a private practice here in Konoha. If I had my way I'd ban her from the village forever."

"Don't say that," Dan replied. "She is my niece and she was your closest friend."

"Yes she *was*. But she is nothing to either of us now. You need to accept that and move on. She has no place in our lives." Tsunade said firmly.

"She has a right to her opinion."

"Fine! Then I have a right to hate her for it. Why do you defend her? If she had her way you and Nawaki would still be gone from me!"

Dan paused and looked down at his plate. "She thinks what was done to bring us back was not only wrong but evil and unnatural." He moved some food about. "I think she is right."

"What?" She choked out.

He looked up and looked at her. "I think we should not have been brought back. I think I should not have been brought back. Two people were *sacrificed* to restore us to life."

"So what?" Dan looked at her in shock. "How many needless pointless deaths have there been since all these wars started? Millions! So what if two more died if it brought you and Nawaki back to me! For the two of you I would pay any price and commit any evil." She stood up and moved to his side.

"Tsunade I think it would be best if I..."

"Don't say it!" She dropped to her knees beside his chair. She reached out and took his hands into hers. "My darling I love you! When I lost you my whole world disappeared. I don't care if it *was*

evil or unnatural to bring you back. For you and Nawaki I would commit any act to let you live."

"But I am not really alive Tsunade." He said gently. "I do not age, I do not bleed, and though I eat with you I do not need food or drink. Whatever it is I am now, I am not a man." He took one hand from her grasp and tenderly touched her face. "I do not belong here with you."

She pressed her cheek against his palm. "Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then your heart is alive, isn't that enough? If you die again then I'll die too."

He shook his head. "No Tsunade I can't..."

"Can't what? Leave me all alone? Abandon me?" She took his other hand and placed it to her other cheek. "You're warm; when you hold me I feel your love and know I am safe. Even if your form is different you are still the man I love. I can't lose you again, I won't lose you again, if you die then I'll die too." Dan looked at her in horror. "When we married you swore you would be with me always were you lying?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then stay with me!" She pleaded. "Don't leave me ever again." She wept, and seeing her weep his heart ached. He loved her.

"Don't cry my love." He leaned forward and kissed her softly. "I won't leave you."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise my love."

"Hey old man!"

Sarutobi put down the paint brush and smiled at his grandson. "Hello Konohamaru."

The young boy stopped and stared. "Old man what are you painting?"

Sarutobi looked at the canvas. It was a picture of a massive fox with nine tails laying a village to waste. The painting was a mass of red and blacks, a portrait of fire and death. "This is from a dream I had."

Konohamaru shivered. "Must have been a real nightmare."

Sarutobi nodded. "It was not pleasant."

"Then why do you want to paint something like that?"

Sarutobi looked at his grandson cautiously. "Sometimes it is good to remember unpleasant things. It helps remind us that some things should not be done and some penalties cannot be avoided."

Konohamaru stared at his grandfather a moment but then shrugged. "Whatever gramps, now come on dad says you taking us to dinner tonight!"

Smiling Sarutobi nodded and put darker thoughts aside for now.

Minato twisted and stirred in his bed. "No..." he moaned.

Everything was on fire! The whole village was burning! He was on his knees surrounded by the inferno unable to move or even cry out. As he knelt there the earth shook, buildings collapsed underneath gigantic paws. Minato stared up in horror into the face of the great Kyuubi. Its power and evil weighed down upon him and he was helpless to do anything. The demon's eyes looked down and they were set upon him. Its mouth opened and in a voice like thunder it spoke.

"FREE ME!!"

The great and terrible

Namikaze Naruto always felt a huge wave of relief and pleasure when the gates came into sight. One more tour completed, once again he was coming home after having served Konoha and the Hokage. And this time he had the added satisfaction of bringing his team back in. In his four years of active service he'd gone to just about every land that Konoha ruled. There were much larger cities in the world. And places that could boast interesting and cosmopolitan atmospheres. But to him Konoha was special. It was where the Hokage lived and the heart of the empire. Ninety nine percent of all ninja lived here. It was the last true ninja village. Mist still stood of course, he'd been there once. But no ninja lived there anymore. It was becoming just another rural backwater. Konoha was the political, economic, and cultural heart of the empire. What happened here mattered.

He brought his team to a halt at the guard station. "I'm really proud of all of you. This was an excellent first tour. Take the rest of today and tomorrow off. We'll meet at training ground twenty five at ten a.m. the following day." His students all nodded happily, even Sasuke.

As they approached the two Jonin at the guard station one of them spoke. "Team Naruto we've been expecting you." As if from thin air four ANBU operatives appears around Haku.

"Momichi Haku, by order of the Hokage you are under arrest." One of the ANBU spoke. Haku did not hear the words as was immediately knocked out by a different operative. The operative quickly tossed him over his shoulder.

"What the hell is this?" Naruto demanded. He took a step and was about to create a rasengan.

One of the ANBU turned towards him. They all had on the black robes and death masks. "Do not interfere! It is the will of the

Hokage!"

"Do you know who his father is?"

"I know who he was. Haku is the son of a traitor and under arrest."

"But..." A part of him wanted to interfere and help his student. But he'd always been taught that his duty was to obey the orders of his Hokage.

"Enough!" Their apparent leader boomed. "We are the personal weapons of the Hokage! Do not interfere or you will know the Hokage's wrath." With a signal the four of them disappeared with Haku.

Naruto stood there stunned. Sasuke shrugged. "Oh well. See you the day after tomorrow sensei." With that Sasuke put his hands in his pockets and walked away.

"Good bye sensei." Sakura hurried after him. "Sasuke-kun want to get something to eat?"

Naruto was surprised by the casual reaction of Haku's teammates. They had only been a team for a couple of months but they had all known each other in the academy. He would have expected more concern for a friend. Frowning Naruto decided he had to do something.

"You want what?" The secretary behind the desk just stared at him as though he were insane. The two ANBU in the room had masks on but he suspected they might have had similar expressions.

Naruto ground his teeth and at least *tried* to sound patient. "I want to speak to the ANBU Commander, Uchiha Itachi." He repeated for the second time.

The woman continued to stare. "In all the years I have worked here I don't believe I've ever had anyone voluntarily come here wanting to speak to the Commander."

"First time for everything I guess."

The woman shook her head sternly. "The Commander does *not* see people unless he sends for them."

"I'm not leaving here until I see him."

The way she was looking at him now he might have sprouted a second head. The phone on her desk rang. She picked it up before the second ring. "Yes sir." She listened a moment. "Yes sir I will send him in." She put the phone down. "The Commander will see you now." The way she said it he might have been waiting for an appointment.

"So where's the camera?" He tried to joke.

She stared at him without a trace of humor. "Do not keep the Commander waiting."

Nodding he went into the office. Sitting there behind a large desk Uchiha Itachi waited for him. He had on the black robes of the ANBU but no death mask. He was wearing his Circle hitai-ite. Leaning forward in his chair the ANBU commander gave him a slow and thoughtful smile.

XXXXXXXXXXHeHhh

The Hokage was alone in his vast and opulent bedroom. Leaning back in a padded chair he detached the gem of the kitsune from its chain. Holding it in his hand it looked and felt like nothing but a glass marble. Despite the shards he had removed the surface of the gem remained perfectly smooth. The gem was a deep and lustrous red, very much like the heart of a flame. It was not a solid red. Looking close one could see the color and shade surge and flow. Like a small

river of fire forever in motion. With a word he had the gem expand. It grew from the size of a marble to that of a crystal ball.

The Hokage studied the now much larger gem. Holding the gem in the palm of his hand he laughed. "Oh Kyuubi great and terrible, will you not come and talk to me?" He mocked. "Will you not tell me again all the punishments you will inflict upon me for daring to use you as my tool?" Orochimaru thrilled at the feel of murderous desire rising up all around. Two vertical slits appeared within the coursing red. The slits expanded and took on the form of a pair of orange fox eyes. The eyes glared out at their tormentor.

Arrogant little snakeling! Yet again you dare to mock me! Know you who I am?! A thunderous voice rang out within the Hokage's head.

Orochimaru smiled with delight. "Of course! You are my tool like all others who serve me."

I am the nine tail demon fox! I am all knowing and all powerful!

He lifted the gem closer to his face. "Then kill me all powerful one!" There was a screaming howl. Orochimaru felt the pleasure he always did when the powerful were forced to admit they were under his control. "I am still living. I still hold you in the palm of my hand. It seems that though you are all powerful you are also powerless. Quite the interesting contradiction."

The orange eyes seemed to narrow a bit. ***I am never powerless mortal not even now. I am eternal and this prison you have encased me in is not. One day I will be free. I will destroy everything that you have built. I will take you with me to my realm and there I will spend a hundred thousand years teaching you your folly.***

"That threat grows boring. Can you not come up with something new at least?"

The fox eyes stared out at him. ***Laugh snakeling. Laugh and revel in your brief moment of power over me. It will end soon enough.*** The eyes closed and were gone.

Orochimaru did laugh. He enjoyed hearing the Kyuubi's threats. The Kyuubi was like a rabid dog held back by a leash and steel chain. Whatever the nine tail fox believed he would *never* escape. Orochimaru allowed the gem to return to its normal size and reattached it to the chain. He was the greatest genius this world had ever seen and he had put all that genius into devising the perfect prison to hold the Kyuubi. Some fools like Zabuzza might believe that simply holding the gem was enough to use its vast powers. Fool! As if he would ever be so careless with such a treasure! The gem held dozens upon dozens of jutsus created and know only to Orochimaru. Layers of security that prevented escape from within or control from without. He had no fear of the Kyuubi's childish threats. He would live and reign forever.

"Welcome Naruto-kun." He paused for a bit. "May I call you Naruto-kun?"

"If that will make things easier then sure."

"Very well, and to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"One of my students was just arrested by the ANBU. This has got to be a mistake. I want Haku released immediately."

"I am very sorry Naruto-kun, but I am afraid that would be impossible."

"But his father is a Circle member! How can you arrest Zabuzza's son?"

"His father was a Circle member." Itachi answered in precise clipped tones. "That was before the Hokage learned he was guilty of treason and executed him."

"Zabuzza is dead?" Naruto was shocked.

Itachi calmly nodded. "He is. You should learn the facts before charging off to make demands. I might have saved you a good bit of time and energy."

"But Zabuzza was a part of the Circle! He was immortal!"

Itachi shrugged. "The Hokage giveth the Hokage taketh away. But now I trust you understand why Haku was arrested and why nothing can be done for him."

"No I don't! Even if Zabuzza was guilty of treason I'm sure Haku had nothing to do with it."

Itachi was surprised to see Naruto still arguing. Perhaps he was not as clever as he'd been led to believe. "It is the will of the Hokage that all members of a traitor's family suffer. Haku is the only son of a traitor. Therefore he will suffer. The matter is closed."

"But..." Naruto tried to think of some way to help. He hadn't known Haku long but he was sure that he was a good kid, and an innocent one.

"The matter is closed Naruto-kun." Itachi looked the youngster over. Definitely not as intelligent or sensible as his father. "He has been condemned by the Hokage. There is nothing more to be said. Now if you will excuse me I have work to do." Itachi opened a folder on his desk.

Naruto was not used to be dismissed, but there was nothing to do about it. As he left ANBU headquarters he was still determined to try and help Haku.

The right and good thing

Naruto was heading home. He was not happy. What had happened to Haku disturbed him deeply. Naruto had seen far too much to have any illusions about how merciful the Hokage could be. But those things had happened to enemies and foreigners in other lands. What had happened to Haku was different. Haku might have been born in Water country but had resettled and given his loyalty to Konoha. He wasn't an enemy or outsider. And even if Zabuzza had been guilty of treason Naruto was one hundred percent sure that Haku had nothing to do with it. Haku was innocent and did not deserve to suffer. When he thought that the image of those children playing in that village flashed through his mind. They had been innocent too. But that was completely different. He tried to think of why. It worried him that the only thing he could come up with was that he knew Haku and hadn't known them. *Is that really it? Does it really only matter which side of the line you're on?* His disturbing thoughts were interrupted by a shout.

"Naruto-kun!"

Looking up he realized he'd been passing the Hyuga estates on the way home. Running out the gates towards him was a girl with long hair and the prettiest lavender eyes. He gave her a big smile. "Hey Hinata-chan." He held open his arms and as she always did when he came home she ran into them.

"Where have you been?" She complained even as she hugged him close. "I heard you checked in over an hour ago!"

"I'm really sorry Hinata-chan. There were just some things I had to do." He leaned down and got his welcome home kiss. It was impossible to be in a bad mood when she was with him. "I'll tell you about it later. How have you been?"

She smiled at him happily. Now that he was with her again everything was fine. "Oh I've been alright." She let out a disappointed sigh. "So far all we've been doing is local patrolling. We just go out for three days and come back. We don't even get more than fifty miles from Konoha!"

"Hinata you and your teammates are all fresh out of the academy. There's nothing wrong with taking a little time to get seasoned."

"Your team was just as raw. Why did you take them to Lightning country?"

Naruto frowned a bit. "Well actually I wanted to take them somewhere quiet for the first tour. I asked for Tea or Rice or Bear country. But orders came to go to Lightning so that's where we went."

"Why did they ignore your request?"

"Two reasons I suspect. One, I think they wanted to keep the Second Flash in a trouble spot. And two, I imagine Sasuke's father is pushing for him to see as much action as possible."

"I wish my parents felt that way. I think mom and dad are trying to keep me safe."

"Good I'm glad to hear that!"

Hinata pulled out of his embrace and crossed her arms. "Naruto-kun I'm a Leaf ninja and I want to prove myself." She frowned at him.

He frowned right back. "Hinata Konoha has more than enough shinobi to do what needs to get done. I want you to be safe Hinata-chan. If anything were to happen to you my heart would break."

Whenever he said such kind words to her, she melted. "Naruto-kun I..." She was cut off as he pulled her back into his arms and kissed

her. There were many wrong and confusing things in his life. But at least she would always be something right and good.

He looked them over. Finally, he saw the perfect one for what he had in mind. Taking out a kunai, he sliced down and cut clean through. Gingerly grasping it, he turned back to Hinata who had been watching with an amused smile. He held out his offering to her.

"Thank you Naruto-kun." She took the rose and put it in her hair. It was one of the sweet little traditions the two of them had.

"Be careful of the thorns."

She chuckled. It really was cute how he worried about her. "I know I've done this before."

He sat down on the little bench beside her. He put his arm around her and held her close. "This is my favorite part of coming home. Just sitting here with you in the rose garden."

"I know I love it here too." She rested her head on his shoulder.

"How is your family doing? How is your mom?"

"Oh she's fine. You know she has been a little weak ever since the sickness. But Tsunade says as long as she gets regular treatments she'll be fine."

"Yeah the old lady really knows what she's doing."

"Be nice Naruto-kun, if it weren't for her my mom might not be all right."

"I said she knew what she was doing." He pouted a bit.

She giggled. Genius or not her Naruto-kun could be silly sometimes. "Anyway mom and dad are both fine. Hinabi is doing well at the academy and is still determined to surpass me one day."

"Good luck! No way she'll ever be the ninja you are Hinata-chan!"

"Maybe she will, she certainly works hard at it. My uncle Hizashi has been talking about going back to active duty."

"Why?"

"Well I think he's kind of bored now that his son is away on missions."

"Oh and how is the stuck up genius?" A trace of annoyance crept into his voice.

"Neji's not that bad." She reminded him. "He's a little annoyed that he and his dad aren't in the main branch. But it's not like he or uncle hate us or anything. Anyway, he and his team are in Grass country right now. He says things in Grass have just about quieted down."

"That's what I've heard too." He frowned some. "That leaves Lightning as the last trouble spot and it hasn't quieted down at all. On my patrol there we were attacked twice."

"What? Was everyone all right?"

He gave her a reassuring smile. "Everything was fine." He told her about the attacks but decided to leave out what had happened in the village.

"You took on three ninjas by yourself? Why didn't you have your team help you?"

"Oh, I just thought it would be easier if I took care of it. It wasn't like they were Jonins they were all low level Genins."

Hinata looked a bit depressed. "I wish I were as strong as you Naruto-kun. We're the same age but you're already one of the top Jonins in the village. While I haven't even stepped outside of Fire country yet."

Naruto looked embarrassed. "Don't feel that way Hinata-chan. I've sparred with you and I've seen you practice. You're a damn good ninja and you'll only get better." He didn't try and tell her she was stronger than he was as they both knew that wasn't true. "Don't compare yourself to me; I'm my father's son and well, when you have the Yellow Flash and Jiraiya as your senseis you tend to learn a lot quickly."

"Well you are special Naruto-kun." She said quietly.

He felt his cheeks heat up and decided to try and change the subject. "Say Hinata-chan are you doing anything next Tuesday?"

Hinata sent him a knowing smile. "No Naruto-kun, is something special happening that day?"

"You might say so. It's October tenth my birthday!" He gave her a huge smile. "The whole village will be celebrating it!"

She laughed. "Oh really Naruto-kun? I thought the celebration was for the Festival of Salvation."

"Well I like to think of that as just a name they use to keep my surprise party a secret."

She hugged her boyfriend and continued laughing. He could be so silly! But she would never want him any other way. "Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? My mom will be making that special ramen you like so much."

"Sure, but I have to talk to my dad first."

Minato watched as his son and his betrothed sat in the rose garden. The two of them had always been close. When Hiashi had seen how much Naruto cared for his daughter he had done everything in his power to get them to spend time together. Hiashi was desperate for a connection between his House and Namikaze and a Circle

member. The two of them had been betrothed last year. Hiashi had told him that as far as he was concerned the greatest service Hinata could perform for her clan was to marry Naruto. He intended for her to be a ninja but to be kept clear of danger. Looking down at his son and Hinata he recalled many of the pleasant days he'd spent with Kushina. She had died tragically in childbirth. He loved and missed her even now, but considered himself blessed for the time they had been given. He knew that his son truly loved Hinata and that she loved him. He wanted his son to enjoy the same happiness he had known. But even more than that he wanted Naruto to not have to spend his entire life at war. He hoped his son would get the chance to live and raise a family in peace. For the first time in twelve years it seemed possible. An end to the constant fighting and killing seemed at hand. All of the ninja lands belonged to the Empire of Konoha. And once the resistance in Lightning was put down there would be no one left to fight. There were of course the lands beyond the western mountains and the nations of the other continents. But none of those lands produced ninja. None of them could ever be a threat.

Each new war had been proclaimed as a necessary and defensive war. Each time another threat to Konoha's security had been eliminated. Did that mean at long last there would be no more wars? Was peace really possible?

"Hey dad."

Minato blinked and turned around to look at his son. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts he hadn't noticed Hinata return home or Naruto enter the mansion. "Hello son how was the tour? Do you like having your own team?"

"The tour was a little rough but nothing I couldn't handle. As to my team I have a problem that I need your help with."

"Oh?"

Naruto grimaced. "I need a favor."

"Well what do you need son?"

He took a deep breath. "An audience with the Hokage."

The new title

Minato had of course asked his son why he needed an audience with the Hokage. Naruto had simply and passionately explained what had happened to Haku along with his conviction that the boy had done nothing wrong. His father had listened carefully and when his son had finished his explanation there was only one possible answer to his request.

"No."

"What?" Naruto did not believe it.

"I said no." Minato repeated firmly. "I will not arrange an audience for you."

"But why not? It would be easy to convince the Hokage to spare him! Just give me five minutes and I know I can convince the Hokage to let him go!"

"I'm sure you could." Minato said quietly.

His son did not understand. "Then why won't you help?"

Minato frowned at his son and wondered if he had protected him too much. If so it was time to pound home some important lessons. "And do you think the Hokage would do so out of the goodness of his heart? He would grant you the favor I do not doubt. But you can be sure there would be a *price* attached to it. Once the Hokage has his hooks into you there is no getting away." Minato sighed. "There may be no getting away regardless; you are a genius of the Namikaze clan and my only son. I am afraid that his eyes will fall on you eventually. But I will not hurry things along."

"But don't you want the Hokage to notice me?"

Minato looked at his son in shock. "No! Naruto if I could I would make it so the Hokage would never have any interest in you at all!"

"But why?"

Sighing he began running through some hand signs. Naruto was again surprised. " **Globe of Confessions Technique.**" Instantly a globe of dark energy encircled them, they disappeared from view. Inside the globe the two of them could not see the room outside. "All right now we can talk in private, but not for too long."

"Dad we're in the middle of our home! Do we really need a privacy jutsu?"

Minato solemnly nodded. "For what I am about to say we do. The windows have eyes and the walls have ears. Or I should say the ANBU do."

"You really think the ANBU would dare spy on us?"

"No son I *know* they spy on us. I have the mansion swept for surveillance devices every month and I have some found every month without fail. I am also quite sure at least a couple of our servants are informers."

"Who?" Naruto demanded feeling betrayed.

"Never you mind, you must always act as though *everyone* around you is an informer. Now we can talk in private but not for too long or it might be noticed. You asked me why I don't want you having an audience with the Hokage. I'll tell you, it's because the Yondaime is a heartless murdering bastard who would use you and then toss you aside like a sack of garbage."

Naruto's jaw dropped. "Dad that's treason!" Naruto whispered.

Minato smiled glumly. "Why are you whispering?" Naruto stared back at him, he wasn't sure. "It's because you are smart enough to know

that if the Hokage knew I had just said that something very bad would happen to me and quite possibly to you as well."

"But you're a member of the Circle!"

"So?" Minato replied calmly. "So was Zabuzza, so was Kisame. It doesn't matter to him son. In Orochimaru's eyes we are, all of us, nothing more than his tools. You and I as much as any farmer or mechanic or prison guard, we are *all* tools to him to be used as he sees fit. Now some tools of course are more valuable and harder to replace than others. But *none* of us are irreplaceable in his eyes."

Naruto felt his stomach turn to lead. "Is that really all we are dad? Just tools?"

"To the Hokage? Yes, and he makes no pretense about it. I tried to protect you son but you need to really understand the situation we live in. There is no justice in this village and there is no safety even if you are innocent. If the Hokage says that you are guilty then you are guilty, even if you are not. And if he were to spare Haku it would have nothing to do with his innocence or guilt, it would only be done as a way for him to more easily bend you into the shape he wants. Your loyalty for your student does you credit, and I wish this was the same village it had been under the Sandaime. But the fact is the price for saving Haku is simply too high. You are going to have to forget him."

"Forget him?" Naruto stared at his father. "You mean just pretend he never was?"

Minato nodded. "That's right; you've had to forget a great many things over the years to stay sane doing what we do in the line of duty. I know I've tried to forget *everything* about Wind country and I am sure you have too. You will just have to forget about him as well." With a gesture he ended the jutsu. "Now I am sure Hinata wants you to go over for dinner. Don't keep her waiting."

Slowly Naruto nodded. He left to go to dinner with the Hyuga's though he didn't feel hungry anymore.

That night Minato dreamed of a village on fire. And of a monstrous nine tailed fox.

The following day he and the other Circle members were again summoned to the royal presence. When the Hokage made his appearance he was in one of his playful moods. Leaning back into his throne he smiled down on all of them.

"I want to share some important decisions I have reached with you my favorite ones. I intend to make some announcements at the Festival of Salvation."

"What sort of announcements my Lord Hokage?" Anko asked.

The rest of them groaned inwardly. Whenever Anko spoke up it always meant Orochimaru wanted to perform a little scene for them and had told her what lines to feed him.

Sure enough the Hokage grinned at her. "Well since you have asked I will tell you. There are two of them. The lesser involves my decision with our difficulties in Lightning country."

Minato's heart sank he *knew* what was coming.

"The resistance there has grown tiresome in my eyes." Orochimaru continued. "I have been patient and both the civilian and ninja population there have misinterpreted my patience as weakness." A wicked smile consumed his face. "It is time to correct that impression. Following the festival we shall commence with Total Pacification of Lightning country."

"So you will butcher everyone in that land as you did the residents of Wind country?" Sarutobi intoned calmly.

Everyone in the room sucked in their breaths and looked to see how Orochimaru would take that. The Hokage's smile withered away as he focused on his mentor.

"You have an... unfortunate way with words. Do you feel ill today Sarutobi sensei?" He continued without giving Sarutobi a chance to answer. "Of course you do, I can see your pale color and how you shake. Your old age has made you frail and your mind prone to wander and reveal foolish thoughts. You need rest my dear sensei! Go." He flipped a hand about as if shooing away a bird. "I give you leave to go home and rest that feeble brain of yours."

"Both my mind and body are in fine health Orochimaru." Sarutobi replied.

"And I say both are failing." Orochimaru said with a slight edge to his voice. "Go and rest your weary bones, that is a command."

Sarutobi bowed. "Far be it from me to refuse an order from the Hokage." Sarutobi calmly left the throne room.

"Why do you tolerate him my Lord?" Anko asked once he was gone.

"You know sweet Anko I begin to wonder that myself." They all knew that was not good. The Hokage's eyes focused on one of them.

"Minato, I shall give you the honor of carrying out the Total Pacification. You did a marvelously efficient job in Wind country. I am sure with that experience you will do an even better job now. You may have as many troops as you like, I will make all the reserves available to you."

Minato felt a cold chill, but there was only one possible answer. He bowed. "I will do my very best Lord Hokage." Despite his best effort he couldn't keep a slight tremor out of his voice.

Hearing it set Orochimaru on a better mood again. "Oh my dear Minato-kun is that nervousness I hear in your voice? There is no

need for that. I have complete faith in your ability. I am certain you will not disappoint me."

"I will certainly try not to Hokage -sama." Orochimaru nodded, well pleased.

After a brief pause Anko turned to the Hokage. "Lord Hokage, if that was the lesser of the two announcements would the greater one possibly be?"

"Oh, but I am glad you asked that little Anko. The greater announcement has to do with my title. You see I have given it a good bit of thought. When I was chosen to become the Hokage I was most honored and pleased to have the title. Truly it was my greatest ambition and had no wish to ever be more than the Kage of my village. Yet these past twelve years have seen unimagined change. There are no other Kages to rival me as there are no other ninja villages to challenge my beloved Konoha. Therefore being known as the Fire Shadow when there are no other shadows seems a bit foolish to me."

"Of course." Anko replied and continued reading her script. "In that case Lord what title do you feel would be proper for one of your immense glory and power?"

"I had considered restoring the ancient title of emperor. Yet even that seemed insufficient. For even an emperor is only a mortal man. I have achieved everlasting life and truly the power to bestow both life and death on whomever I choose." The smile expanded. "Truly am I not become a living god?"

"Indeed!" Anko nodded her eager agreement. Minato concentrated on hiding what he thought about it. Orochimaru couldn't possibly...

"On the night of the Festival of Salvation I shall proclaim myself to be a living god and I shall take the title of God Emperor."

Hearing this they all bowed and acknowledged him not as Hokage, but as God Emperor.

Minato swallowed four sleeping pills in the hopes he would have no more dreams. The waking world was quite horrible enough he didn't need sleep to have nightmares. He was already trapped in a never ending one. Was Orochimaru truly insane? To even *think* such a thing was to invite divine retribution. To proclaim it and have people acknowledge it! There were many old stories that told what happened whenever men grew arrogant enough to challenge the gods. The gods were not mocked. Such arrogance was *always* punished. He drifted off to sleep wondering what punishment Orochimaru was inviting on himself and Konoha.

Konoha was burning all around him. He could hear the screams of the dying and taste the smoke that consumed the air. He was on his knees in brown grass. Looking up he knew instantly where he was. The Namikaze mansion was engulfed in fire all four stories were a blaze. He was kneeling down in the rose garden. The roses were all brown or black, being baked in the heat.

"Beautiful isn't it?" A woman's soft voice spoke.

He turned around and froze. There only a few feet away was his darling Kushina. She was standing there in the same white kimono she had worn at their wedding. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling. Standing he went over to her and put his hands gently on her arms. Though he knew this was all a horrible nightmare she still felt real to him.

"Kushina is it really you?"

The woman slowly opened her eyes. They were not the deep green he'd expected, but red and the pupils were slits like a fox's. "Not quite."

The nightmare

Minato let go of her and stumbled back. "Who are you?" He choked out.

Kushina simply stood there and smiled at him playfully. "Guess."

Standing there he slowly brought his sudden panic back under control. He was a shinobi; he had to control his fear. "You are the Kyuubi aren't you?"

She brought her hands together in slow loud claps. "Bravo! You only needed one guess!"

"This is not real, this is just a nightmare. You're not really the Kyuubi."

Her smile turned wicked. "I thought it would be easier to talk to you like this, but if you prefer my other form..."

"No!"

Kushina laughed and it was *her* laugh. "That is what I thought. As for this not being real you are right, it is all just a fantasy. As for me not being Kyuubi little mortal you could not be more wrong. I am."

"That's impossible! The Kyuubi is bound within the gem of the kitsune! You and all of this is just my imagination! You're a manifestation of my guilt!"

"And what do you have to feel guilty about?"

With those words everything disappeared. The fire, the smoke, the earth beneath his feet were all gone. He felt the sickening sensation of just falling through the absolute blackness.

Then it stopped and he was standing again. There was no fire or smoke and the air was cold. It was night and there was a full moon out. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust and for him to see where he was. When he saw he began to scream. He was standing on a body, on two bodies really as each foot rested on a different corpse. He was down in a massive pit hundreds of yards across and it was filled with the dead. The entire floor of the pit was covered with rotting corpses. He tried to leap out but instead just slipped and fell. He fell and was face to face with the decaying skull of an old woman. Instinctively he reached out with his hands to push away only to have them sink into something warm and gooey. He shut his eyes and simply screamed. Ninja or not this was more than he could bear.

And as he lay there among the corpses with eyes shut he felt himself falling again. Opening his eyes he saw himself falling through the infinite darkness once again.

This time when it ended he was on his knees again in the rose garden. The fires were out though the lingering pall of smoke remained in the air. There were no more screams. He noticed his hands were covered in a yellowish brown substance. He turned his head to the side and vomited. He vomited and heaved until he was empty. Then removing his jacket he desperately wiped his hands as clean as he could. With that done he threw the jacket away in disgust.

"Do you believe I'm the Kyuubi now?" Kushina asked gently.

Minato looked up at her and slowly nodded. "This isn't a normal dream is it?"

Smiling Kushina shook her head. "Everything around you is a part of *my* mind. The details I have drawn from you but I control this reality."

He looked up at her knowing he was helpless and at her mercy. "What do you want?"

She tilted her head in an oddly cute way. "Only two things; freedom and vengeance, and I mean to have them both."

"And why am I here?"

"Because you are going to help me."

"No! I won't let you control me! I would rather die."

Kushina shook her head with a chuckle. "If I could control you in the waking world do you really think I would be talking to you right now? As you pointed out so brilliantly my body and my chakra are trapped within that cursed gem. This," she waved about at the ruins. "Is all I can do."

"Do you really think you can make me betray my village? No matter how many horrors you make me witness I will never turn on my village."

"Oh really?" She said gently in the soft voice that he loved. "Now you are devoted to your village? Why lie? I can read your thoughts like words on the page. I know the doubts you have; you are consumed with them and with guilt. Why do you think I chose you?"

"I don't know why did you?"

She shook her head. "Because you fool you are the only one who can end this. You can release me from my prison."

He looked at her with horror. "Release you? Are you insane? Why would I do that?"

"Because of this." She waved an arm about contemptuously.

He felt the earth beneath him give way and heard the crashing of the ruined mansion crumbling in on itself. All around him the ground crumbled away. He fell down a few feet and managed to keep his balance. Once again he was standing on dead bodies. He looked about and saw they were *everywhere*. As far as the eye could see

there were corpses. Dream or no dream he could smell that sickening odor of rot filling the air. He had to fight to keep from gagging.

"Why are you showing me this?!"

"I am drawing this from your own memory." She calmly held up a manila folder. Opening it she began to read. "Just like this. 'Assessment of Total Pacification of Wind country; for Hokage's eyes only. Estimated population of Wind country was set at fourteen million. Number of confirmed deaths thirteen million, six hundred twenty seven thousand eight hundred and nine. The exact number of refugees who escaped is unknown and cannot be known. As of this time the operation is complete. There are no living people in Wind country except for Konoha military personnel. All cities, villages, homes, and other buildings have been burned and otherwise destroyed. Estimated total wealth salvaged before destruction stands at two billion ryu and is still being calculated at this time. This wealth includes not only precious materials such as gold and silver but hard assets such as machinery as well as livestock. The land is and shall remain available for future settlement at the Hokage's discretion. The operation is now declared complete. Your devoted servant, Namikaze Minato.' It only took you sixteen months to slaughter everyone, two whole months ahead of schedule. The little snake was extremely pleased with you."

He looked down at the bodies he was standing on. Old men and women, mothers, children, babies. "I was only following orders." He looked back up at Kushina. "I had no choice!"

Kushina smiled. "Do you think I care human? You are ants to me. Whether one of you dies or a million or a billion it means nothing at all to me. But it matters a great deal to you." She tossed down the folder. "You say you had no choice. Well you have one now. You can end this. Or you can go to Lightning country and follow orders again."

"What... what will happen to the village and the people in it if I free you?"

"Mmmm," Kushina said dreamily. "The village I'll burn down to the ground and I will slaughter every last living thing within it."

"What! But most of the people are innocent!"

Kushina laughed. "And what were most of the people in Wind country? I mean to have my vengeance not only on the snakeking but on this village he has made in his own image."

"I won't do it then." He said firmly.

"That's bad news for all the little babies in Lightning country then isn't it?" She laughed as he flinched. "Innocent people are going to die whatever you do. The difference is once I've had my fun I'll stop and go home. The snakeking will never stop. If you do not free me you condemn your whole world to war and massacre. Are the lives of the people in this village worth so much more than those of the whole rest of your world?" Minato stared at her not sure just what to say. He was a Leaf nin how could he willingly help destroy his village? Kushina smiled at him fondly. "Go and talk to Sarutobi."

"What? Why?"

"Talk to him and see what he has to say. Now it's time for me to say good bye. We *will* talk again."

Minato opened his eyes and awoke in his bed.

Sarutobi

Sarutobi stood before the Hokage (soon to be God Emperor) patiently puffing on his pipe. This was a rare audience where the Hokage had actually done most of the listening. Sarutobi had requested a private meeting with the Hokage and the Yondaime had been generous enough to grant it. The Yondaime had actually thought his old teacher had finally come to his senses and was going to request he be permitted to enter the circle. But his request had been something completely different and most unwelcome.

"You come to me for *this* ?" Orochimaru spat out. "You come here to insult me and all that I have offered to share with you?"

"I have spoken no insult that I am aware of." Sarutobi replied calmly. "I have simply made a request. I wish simply to do what any shinobi might do when he feels circumstances require it."

Orochimaru's face darkened. "What circumstances do you refer to?"

"This village is not the one I grew up in, fought for, and devoted so many years of my life trying to protect. It has changed drastically."

"That's right!" Orochimaru spoke proudly. "I have made Konohagakure the heart of the greatest empire the world has ever known. I have made it the only remaining ninja village! I have filled the parks with monuments, expanded the village limits, and filled the sky line with new construction. In another fifty years I will make Konoha the richest and most powerful city in the world!"

"Perhaps," Sarutobi replied quietly. "But that was not what the Shodai dreamed of when he founded it. He dreamed of a place where the people would strive to protect and help one another. He dreamed of a village where the children born here could grow strong and wise and live in peace."

"Peace?" Orochimaru shook his head. "Peace only breeds weakness and stagnation. Only in war do you develop strength and true power. Besides, in the end are we ninja not living weapons? Are we not instruments of war? What use has a ninja in a peaceful world?"

"He can live to see his children grow up and grow old with those he loves."

Orochimaru stared at him. "You truly have grown senile old man; this ridiculous request of yours only proves it."

Sarutobi looked directly at his former student and Orochimaru saw again the eyes of a stern teacher and father figure. "I wish I were senile. I wish all sense had departed me and that I had no memory of the past or understanding of this present. But that is not the case. I understand only too well this world around me, and the memory of my past failures haunt me and shame me." He shook his head. "Orochimaru, I have never asked anything of you save that you try and be a good Hokage and protect and lead the village."

Orochimaru nodded. "And I have done so."

Sarutobi stared at him a moment considering, then spoke. "Orochimaru, this is the last favor I shall ever ask of you. If you still feel any respect for me at all as mentor and sensei, grant me what I ask."

Orochimaru frowned. "Fine," he sounded like a petulant child. "Do what you want, I won't interfere." The Hokage stared at his old teacher with odd mixture of anger, annoyance, and... sadness. He had a bit of a look like a child saying a final goodbye to a beloved parent. "Goodbye sensei, and if it means anything to you. I will miss you."

Before Sarutobi could speak the Hokage was gone. Sarutobi let out a sigh. As he'd done for so many years he thought about his mistakes and what he could have done. That last look from Orochimaru had reminded him of the curious and lonely little boy he

had once been. He knew that look would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Sarutobi!" Minato called out to him.

Just outside the tower the old man came to a halt. "Hello Minato, what brings you here?"

He smiled at the old man. "You actually, I was wanting to talk to you today."

Sarutobi gave him a slight grin. "Excellent timing, had you waited until tomorrow you would not have been able to speak to me."

"Oh? Are you going on a trip?"

He nodded. "You might say that. I am going to commit seppuku tonight."

"What?!" Minato stared at the man in shock. "But you can't! Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because I can no longer live in this world knowing I had a hand in creating it. I can no longer bear my shame and so I will have a last dinner with my family and then I shall end my life." He sighed. "I even extracted a promise from the Hokage not to restore me to life."

Minato didn't know what to say. "Won't you reconsider? There is so much good in this life!"

"There is," Sarutobi agreed. "But I find I can no longer enjoy what good there is in the world knowing the wickedness that also resides within it." Minato looked about a bit nervously, the things he was saying... "My apologies Minato, I will try and govern my tongue for your sake. What did you want to talk about?"

He swallowed. "A dream I had last night."

Sarutobi's eyes flashed with understanding and with sympathy. "Why don't we go take a walk in the park?"

Minato nodded, the park was the best place to have a conversation without being over heard.

"You know the sort of dream I had." Minato whispered making sure no one else was near.

"I do." Sarutobi whispered back. "The Hokage's, 'guest' spoke to you as she did to me. She made certain demands of you." Minato nodded weakly. "And you refused to help her."

"Of course!"

Sarutobi continued to walk with him in silence for a bit. "I agreed to help."

Minato came to a halt and his jaw fell. "What?!"

"You might want to be quieter."

Remembering they could be under surveillance he spoke in a hushed tone but did not try to hide his anger. "You actually agreed to do what she asked?"

"Yes, but in the end I could not actually bring myself to destroy the village I once loved and protected." He looked sternly at Minato. "*You* will have to be the one to do it."

Minato stared at the kindly old man. "Do you understand what you are saying?"

"I do," Sarutobi whispered, his face calm, his tone resigned. "This is no longer the village that you and I once loved. In the last thirteen years it has changed completely. It is now a village where the ANBU are a law unto themselves, where grown men must speak in

whispers, where death camps are an open secret, where a leader means to call himself a god and command people to worship him, and where the massacre of millions of innocent people is about to take place again. Tell me Minato is this village worth saving?"

"If that is how you honestly feel then why didn't *you* do it?"

"Because I was once Hokage. I swore to always protect this village and in the end I found I could not bring myself to destroy what I worked so hard to protect."

Minato understood that. "I was never Hokage, but I was and am a shinobi of this village and have also spent my life trying to serve and protect it. How can I betray Konoha?"

"By remembering what will happen if you do not. Do you think it will ever end?" Sarutobi halted and turned to him. His voice was still a whisper but it was sharp and cutting. "The wars, the camps, the slaughter of innocents, do you think they will end? He will live and rule forever and he will not be happy until he has enslaved this entire world. How many *billions* must die for the sake of this village? What rights have we to impose such a fate of the entire *world*?" Sarutobi reigned himself in. He looked away. "Forgive me Minato; I have no right to judge you so harshly when I am unwilling to do what must be done." He looked away and sighed. "I have lived far too long, and seen far too much." He looked back up at Minato. "You should have been the Yondaime, I knew it, but I had so much hope that Orochimaru could put aside his darker impulses. I was a fool and all that has happened in the last thirteen years can be put at my doorstep. You are a good man Minato. Think on the truth of what I have said. I know you will do what you think is right." He turned and began to walk away. "Goodbye Minato, I hope you prove far wiser than I."

Just a few miles from Konoha was a secret camp. It was surrounded by minefields and barbed wire, ANBU patrolled and guarded it. This was camp six, officially it did not exist, but everyone knew about it.

They would tell each other stories about this place in guarded whispers. This was the place where shinobi prisoners were brought. It was said that no prisoner brought here had ever left, no one escaped no one was ever released. 'Going to camp six' was a slang phrase for being about to die.

Just past the mine fields Namikaze Naruto was lying face down in the tall grass dressed in an all black uniform including ninja mask. He knew what he was about to do was stupid and reckless. *I won't abandon Haku, not when I know he's innocent.* "Guess I'm going to camp six." He joked to himself. With a one handed sign he disappeared.

A very bad boy

Earlier that day.

Though bothered by worries for Haku he still had responsibilities to his other students. They had two months to train and get themselves ready for their next war patrol. He arrived at training ground twenty five about a quarter to ten and was pleased to see both his students already there. Not surprisingly he found Sakura pestering Sasuke and the Uchiha trying to ignore her. Spotting his arrival Sasuke hurried over to him, no doubt eager to start training. Not surprisingly Sakura was right on his heels.

"How are you two feeling? Did you enjoy your time off?" Nartuto asked trying to seem upbeat.

"It was fine." Sasuke shrugged.

"It was really great to be back home again." Sakura said cheerfully. "Sensei any word on who are new member will be?"

He quirked an eyebrow at the question. "New member? Aren't you hoping to get Haku back?"

Both of them looked surprised at first. Sakura then looked uncomfortable, while Sasuke smirked at him. "I guess it's true then. Niisan said you actually came to see him to try and get Haku released." Sasuke shook his head. "You're probably about the only person who's not in the Circle who could do something like that."

"Naruto-sensei," Sakura spoke a bit timidly. *She* wasn't related to a Circle member. "Is it safe to even mention him?"

Naruto sent her a severe frown. "Are you afraid to even say his name? *Haku* is your teammate. Are you going to just pretend you never knew him?"

"Yes," Sasuke said unapologetically. "He was our teammate now he's a nonperson. He never existed."

A, 'nonperson' was what you called someone who was arrested by the ANBU. The second you were arrested you no longer existed in society. Even mention of your name could get you in trouble. Friends cut you out of their memories and conversations. Parents packed away your things and tried to forget. Everyone pretended that the nonperson had never been. It was just safer that way. *A week ago they were comrades ready to risk their lives for one another, now they won't even say his name. Is this really all there is? Am I supposed to play along and forget him too?* He grimaced at the thought. *I wouldn't have abandoned him on the battlefield am I really supposed to just abandon him to the ANBU when I know he's innocent of anything?*

"Naruto-sensei what sort of training do you have in mind for us?" Sakura spoke up, clearly eager to change the subject.

He let out a sigh. Whatever he decided to do wouldn't involve his former teammates. He might as well take care of his duty to them and worry about Haku later. "All right, I want to start with some basic ninjutsu training..."

He had tried to do this the right way. He'd spoken to the head of the ANBU and been denied a meeting with the Hokage. There were no other legal avenues to go through. It wasn't as though he could go to a lawyer or judge. That led him to try the wrong way. He was a ninja, one of the elite Jonins of Konohagakure. He'd used his skills on many questionable endeavors. Now he would use them on a rescue mission he had no doubts about. He knew where Haku was being kept. Before going on patrol he had marked each of his students so he could track and reach them by body flicker in case of any emergency. Following the seal on Haku had led him to cam six. Other than the barbed wire and minefield to look at the place you would think it was just a low rent district somewhere in Konoha. There were eight identical four story buildings. All of them of a basic

rectangular design, all made of simple red brick, nothing really ominous or noteworthy about any of them. But this place was the stuff of nightmares.

Taking a deep breath he body flickered to where Haku was. He found himself in a lab with three startled men in white lab coats. Before they could make any noise or set off any sort of alarm he knocked them all unconscious. With them out he stopped and looked about the lab. There were large pieces of equipment everywhere, all of them humming and with various lights flashing. It took just a moment to sort things out.

"Who are you?" He jumped around to confront the person. He immediately saw she was not threat to him. She was a prisoner. She was lying naked on a metal table with her wrists and ankles bolted down. She was young, a teenager, she seemed attractive, or would if it weren't for the scars on her body and being able to count her ribs. Her blonde hair was cut extremely short and across her forehead were stamped the numbers 11756 in thick black numerals. She had green eyes that somehow seemed to look right through him. She didn't seem afraid, just curious. "Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am, who are you?"

"Prisoner 11756." She rattled off automatically.

He slowly shook his head and came to her side. "What's your name?"

She stared at him. "Is this some kind of trick? I'm nothing, I less than garbage, I don't have a name I have a number."

He didn't really know what to do. He was wasting time but he felt a need to see if he could help this girl. "Did you ever used to have a name?"

She continued to stare at him and he saw confusion and mounting worry. "Will I be punished if I say?"

He shook his head. "No of course not."

She hesitated before whispering an answer. "Temari, I used to be called Temari." She chuckled. "I used to be a princess once, back in Suna."

Naruto gasped. He'd heard of her! She was the Kazekage's daughter! She's been captured fighting outside the walls of Suna. She'd been spared on the orders of the Hokage because it amused him to keep one member of the Suna nobility alive. She'd been one of a bare handful of prisoners to be kept alive and returned to Konoha. Looking at her he wasn't sure whether to call her lucky for that.

"What year is it?" She suddenly asked.

"Year? It's 1293."

"I'm fifteen," she said suddenly. "I've been here three years, it seemed so much longer."

"I'm looking for someone. A boy fifteen years old, his name is Haku, he is new here."

"You're here to rescue the new prisoner?" Naruto nodded. She stared up at him and hope replaced fear and curiosity. "If I tell you where he is will you do something for me?"

"I don't think I can rescue you too." He said sadly. Trying to rescue Haku was desperate enough, but trying to carry two people to safety was far too much.

She smiled. "That's o.k. I gave up on ever seeing the sun again a long time ago. If I help you please kill me."

He was immediately reminded of the ninja he'd killed a week ago in Lightning. He'd chosen a quick death over being a prisoner. There

were times when death really was a mercy. "All right I promise, if you help me find Haku I'll end your life quickly and painlessly."

She nodded eagerly. "He's behind that vault door there, it's a giant freezer."

"A freezer?!" he hurried to it and was quickly able to unbolt it. As soon as he got the heavy door open he was hit by a wave of subzero cold. Sure enough chained up inside was a naked Haku. Wires connected to his skin monitored his vital signs. On his forehead the number 54238 had been tattooed. "Haku!"

The boy was alive and looked up at him. "Se... se... sensei?"

Naruto quickly tore off his iron bonds and got him out of there and wrapped up in a white lab jacket. "What in kami's name were they doing to you?"

"Te... te... test... testing... m... my i... ice ability."

Naruto felt disgusted and dirty to know he served a village that would do this to someone.

"Your promise!" Temari called to him pleading. "Please keep your promise."

He came to her side and took out a kunai. "I will."

Seeing the kunai in his hand a smile split her weary face and tears of joy came to her eyes. "Oh thank you! Thank you! Thank you! May kami bless and keep you for this my savior!"

He had done a great deal of killing since leaving the academy. He had also done his share of mercy killings like this one. He had never had anyone be so grateful to him for it. He had never felt so guilty for performing it. "I'm very sorry." He did what he could for her; he made it a quick and clean job.

"Naruto-sensei, why have you come here?" Haku asked.

He smiled at the older boy. "Because as long as I am your sensei Haku I will not abandon you. I never abandon a teammate or a comrade no matter what the danger." He went over to Haku and put an arm around him, he seemed barely able to stand. Naruto hadn't really planned this out very well. He'd hoped to somehow get in undetected, rescue Haku, get out undetected, and help Haku make a run for it. But that was out of the question now; Haku would need some time to recover. "All right plan B." With an arm around Haku they body flickered away.

30 MINUTES LATER

Anko was furious. She could give a damn about the dead girl or the escaped prisoner. But someone had broken into the camp that was *her* responsibility. This would damage her reputation and standing with *him*. "Bring in an Inuzuka now!! There is no way in hell the bastard who did this is getting away with it!"

Anko glared at the ANBU. "You had better be absolutely sure about this!"

The ANBU nodded. Inuzuka Tsume spoke with finality. "There's no doubt both of them are in there."

Anko had brought five full squads of ANBU with her. The only problem was she didn't dare use them. "Damn it all." She'd wanted to fix this on her own, but that would be impossible now.

"What are your orders Anko-sama?" Tsume asked. Tsume was not eager to assault this place, but then again Anko was never known for restraint.

"For now, do nothing at all. Stay in the shadows and watch until I return." With that Anko was gone.

Tsume shook her masked head. "I guess she can be restrained when she really has to be." Passing on the order the ANBU scattered about the perimeter of the Namikaze estates.

Minato was very surprised when a servant told him there were two visitors for him at the front door. That was nothing compared to his surprise at seeing who the visitors were.

"Hokage-sama! What are you doing here?" Minato quickly bowed as the Hokage and Anko entered his home.

Orochimaru laughed and displayed a wide and playful smile.
"Minato-kun, it seems your son has been a very bad boy."

The decision

"Wake up Naruto." His father's voice was strained as the lights came on in his bedroom.

Like all shinobi he was trained to be a light sleeper and came fully awake almost immediately. He opened his eyes and sat up in bed. What he saw made his stomach turn to lead. His father had entered his bedroom and with him was the Hokage and Circle member Anko. He knew what this meant. He immediately leapt out of bed and fell to one knee casting his eyes down. "Hokage-sama please allow me to explain."

"Shut up you damn traitor!" Anko howled at him. Naruto could feel her killer intent come off her in waves.

But from the Hokage he could sense no anger at all. Indeed with his eyes firmly on the floor he could hear a mild chuckling. "Now, now, little Anko no need to be so harsh. Do not be afraid Naruto-kun I am not really upset with you." He laughed. "Actually I am quite impressed. Stand up and look at me Naruto-kun."

You did not question an order from the Hokage. Naruto stood up straight and looked at the man who held his life in his hands. With a huge smile the Hokage approached him. Naruto could see panic just beneath his father's calm exterior. Anko was not trying to hide her fury and he was sure she would attack him if it were not for the Hokage. The Lord Hokage was dressed in his formal gold and white robes. Naruto felt a terrible chill pass over as the Hokage stood before him and leaned in close to inspect him. Those slitted eyes seemed to strip away his flesh to examine his heart. Those eyes, so inhuman, so monstrous, he felt the urge to run to get away. He gritted his teeth a bit and reminded himself that he was a shinobi of the leaf. In the academy they had taught him that he was no more than a tool for their beloved Hokage. He lived and died for the Hokage.

The eyes stayed on him as a soft whisper filled his hearing. "Oh yes you do impress me little Naruto-kun. Tell me, why did you do such a naughty thing? If you were *anyone* else Anko would have you in a lab and be having her fun with you." Naruto did not want to imagine what that sadist's idea of fun was. "So tell me, why you did it Naruto-kun?"

He swallowed and made sure his voice came out without any tremor. "I did it because Haku is one of my students and I believed him to be innocent of any crime. I felt it to be my duty as his sensei to help him if I could, Hokage-sama."

"I see." The Hokage finally leaned back away from him. "Hmmm, it seems you have an overdeveloped sense of loyalty. I rather like loyalty Naruto-kun, though I like it best when it is directed towards me. Tell me Naruto-kun why did you not simply come to me with this?"

Naruto hesitated not sure how to best answer that. But then his father spoke up.

"He did ask me to arrange an audience Hokage-sama. I refused to do so."

The Hokage turned to look at Minato in surprise. "And why would refuse Minato-kun?"

"I did not want my son seeking favors from you Hokage-sama."

Orochimaru feigned a hurt expression. "Oh Minato-kun!" He put both hands over his heart theatrically. "Do you really think that such a small request would upset me?" He turned back towards Naruto and smiled at him. "I can be very generous when the mood strikes me. Naruto-kun, you were born on the day I defeated the Kyuubi were you not?"

He nodded. "Hai, Hokage-sama, I always thought it good luck that I was born on that day."

"Well then, I will give you the traitor's son as a birthday gift. He is yours to do with as you please."

Naruto was shocked. The idea that a person could just be *given* to someone like some toy or pet. But he understood that things could be far worse and so quickly bowed. "Thank you Hokage-sama. Thank you for your mercy." When he stood from his bow he saw the Hokage still eyeing him with a disturbing amount of curiosity.

"I am surprised that I have not given you more notice before this Naruto-kun. You are Minato's heir and as great a genius as he. Oh I think you will have a great future ahead of you." He laughed. "You know I have two openings in the Circle." Anko and Minato both gasped, but for very different reasons.

"Hokage-sama," Minato interjected quickly. "He is only twelve; surely it is far too soon to even consider that."

Orochimaru thought for a moment and slowly nodded. "Yessss, of course, I understand that both Nawaki and Obito complain about being locked in childish forms." He nodded to Naruto. "Have no fear Naruto-kun I would not do that to you. I can wait until you are twenty or so." The Hokage seemed to ponder for another moment. "You should have children as soon as possible, at least two or three. You cannot procreate once you are made immortal, and it would be a shame to have no more Namikaze's in my service." He leaned in once again and whispered in the boy's ear. "I have great plans for you Naruto-kun."

Though he tried not to Naruto could not keep a shiver from running through him.

Anko was absolutely furious as she stalked out to inform the ANBU to stand down and return to the camp. She was livid at the thought that Naruto had actually received his *approval* for breaking into her camp. But she knew her sensei well; he had been impressed and likely really would make the little bastard immortal.

When Anko stormed out the door Minato was left alone with the Hokage.

"Hokage-sama, may I speak to you in private for just a moment?"

Orochimaru nodded, feeling very generous this morning. "What is it Minato-kun?"

Minato swallowed. "Do you truly mean to make Naruto a Circle member?"

"Oh yessss, I have many great plans for him. He not only has great skill and power but a sharp mind and courage." He laughed. "He is just like you Minato, only more so. Do you know Minato there was a time I thought I would have to kill you."

The Hokage had said the last with his same good humor. Minato accepted the words without concern. "Really Hokage-sama? May I ask why?"

"Ku ku, ku well Minato-kun you were such a man of high morals I truly feared you would oppose me even if it was hopeless. I am very glad that your common sense was stronger than your silly ideals."

You're wrong. Minato thought. I did not serve you for my own sake, but to protect Naruto. If I'd resisted he'd have died with me and I couldn't allow that to happen.

"He will have to change a bit of course." Orochimaru continued to speak unaware of Minato's thoughts. "We will have to reshape him a bit and wean him off of some of his sillier notions. But it shouldn't be too hard. Once I stain him with my colors he should make an excellent servant as you have."

"I see." *Oh my son! This is what I tried to protect you from all these years. Once his claws are in you he will **never** let go.* "Hokage-sama may I ask a question?"

"Yesss?"

"Once Lightning country has been pacified that will not be the end will it? Even with all the ninja lands conquered that will not be the end. Surely you intend to add the whole of the world to your conquests."

Orochimaru stared at him, and then laughed. "Oh bravo!" He clapped his hands in appreciation. "Bravo Minato-kun! Not even Anko has thought that far ahead yet, though I suspect Itachi may have. You truly have a sharp mind Minato-kun! Yes of course we shall conquer this entire world. How could I ever be satisfied with anything less? In the coming years we shall make the empire of Konoha a world empire. One world, one empire, and one god emperor to rule it all. Can you imagine it?" Orochimaru took a shuddering breath trying to picture it.

"Yes, Hokage-sama I can." He imagined the wars on distant lands and the massacres that would follow. That Konoha would win was not in doubt. The ninja lands could not resist the Kyuubi's power. What hope had the rest of the world? He imagined all the world brought into the empire. He pictured the entire human race turned into slaves before their god emperor. There would be resistance of course, there was always was. And where the resistance was too great there would be Total Pacification. Whole nations would be exterminated to satisfy the ambitions of one evil man. And it would never end. There would always be resistance even if it was hopeless. Human beings were never meant to live as slaves, they needed freedom and that need was too fundamental to the human spirit to ever be conquered.

It was in that moment that Minato reached a decision. "Hokage-sama, while I am truly grateful for your mercy I feel Naruto needs to suffer a small punishment for what he has done."

Orochimaru shrugged. "You are his father; if you wish to punish him you may certainly do so."

"I wish him to be out of Konoha on October tenth. I think missing not only the festival but his own birthday party will teach him a valuable lesson. I would like to send him off with both Haku and Hinata for about a week."

Orochimaru frowned. "I intend to announce my new title of god emperor to the world during the festival. It was my wish to have as many people bear witness to it as possible."

"Hai, Hokage-sama, it is sure to be a moment when history is made. Missing such a moment will only add to his remorse."

"And why should the Hyuga heiress also miss it?"

Minato thought quickly. "They have been having some disagreements of late. Perhaps a shared difficulty will bring them closer together."

Orochimaru shrugged. It really wasn't important enough to argue about. "You have my permission; those three may be out of the village for the festival."

He bowed low. "Thank you Hokage-sama."

Though it was early morning Minato had much to do and did not waste time.

"Thank you for honoring my request." Minato said.

Hiashi smiled and nodded. "I am more than happy to. Though I know Hinata will be disappointed to miss the festival she will enjoy spending time with her fiancé."

That Hiashi would agree was never in doubt. Anything that strengthened Naruto's ties to his daughter would receive his approval.

Mr. Todiyo was the owner and head of the largest gem and jeweler's house in Konoha. He was used to doing business in private with powerful men. But even for him this private meeting was rather intimidating.

"You know who I am?" The ninja sitting across from him wasted no time.

Todiyo rose from his seat to offer yet another bow. "Of course Namikaze-sama. All know the members of the Circle."

Minato nodded; there were times when his special status came in very handy. He placed a large leather briefcase on the man's desk. Minato had simply emptied out the private vault at home; he hadn't even bothered with visiting the bank "There is five million ryu in cash there. I want you to provide me 4 million ryu's worth of cut diamonds and ten pounds of pure gold. Given the price of gold that will leave you a very hefty profit. There are however two special conditions. You must have my order ready for me by the end of business today. Also this transaction must remain absolutely secret. Should anyone, anyone at all, learn of it I will kill you. Am I clear Todiyo-san?"

The man visibly paled and quickly nodded. A Circle member could kill *anyone* below their station without worry. The man stood up and bowed deeply. "I understand most clearly Namikaze-sama, and I assure you this shall be handled with the greatest of secrecy."

"Very well then." Minato stood up to go. He did not enjoy threatening people, but he was pressed for time. "I shall return here at the close of business and I will expect you to hand me my order." He began to leave.

"Namikaze-sama, do you not wish to hold on to your money until the order is ready?" Minato had left the briefcase sitting on his desk.

Minato merely shook his head. "No, keep it. After all it is only money."

Todiyo watched him go with an open mouth, not believing anyone could be so cavalier about such a sum.

In the private library he had gathered together every last scroll and manual of the ninja arts. He had also included a book of the clan history and a couple of photo albums. They covered an entire table. He performed a hand sign. " **Seal** ." All the books and scrolls suddenly disappeared. On the scroll before him new symbols appeared. He sighed, that had been the easy part. Now he had to write a letter explaining everything.

Minato handed his son a small but very heavy wooden chest. Naruto looked at him in surprise. "What is this?"

His father handed him a map and formal written orders signed and sealed by the Hokage. "We own some land about three hundred miles from here. You, Haku, and Hinata will be leaving tomorrow morning to deliver that chest there. It will take you two days to get there. Remain and enjoy the tranquility for three days and then return."

Naruto looked completely dumbfounded. "But what about my birthday? It's in three days!"

"I know that." His father said in annoyance. "You may think of this as a small punishment for your actions."

Naruto frowned. "I never thought the Hokage was that petty."

"This was my idea Naruto."

"Yours? *You're* sending me away from the village on the night of the festival of salvation? Why?" Naruto demanded.

"I have my reasons." Minato answered and refused to say more on the subject.

Naruto seemed upset. "If you want to punish me and Haku I suppose I can accept that, but let Hinata stay here."

"No!" Minato said sharply. "All three of you are going. The matter is not up for debate."

Naruto sighed; it was not the end of the world. "Fine, who do I deliver the chest to?"

From a pocket Minato took out a small crystal ball with a metal key inside. "If the crystal should break take the key and open the chest. You will find a letter with instructions on what to do next. Should the crystal not break bury the chest somewhere and return with the crystal. I have sealed both the chest and crystal."

Naruto began feeling a bit of worry. "Dad what is this about? What's going on?"

"I will explain everything to you later son." *Either in person or by letter.* "Now it's late and you'll be leaving early. Let's get some sleep."

He *knew* she would be there that night. He was standing in the ash swept remains of the rose garden beside the ruins of his home. She was standing there before him with her eyes closed, wearing her favorite formal gown. She spoke with that voice that he had loved so much.

"I love you Minato-kun. I will always love you. Even if we are separated by death my love for you shall remain." Her red eyes opened and Kushina smiled at him.

"Those were her last words to you weren't they? She said them to you just before she died from child birth."

Feeling his throat tighten he nodded. "Yes, they were."

Kushina stood there a moment smiling at him. "Tell me, why didn't you bring her back? Kakashi and Tsunade brought back the ones they loved. Why didn't you?"

"Had the Hokage known that jutsu then I think I would have. But he did not develop it until four years later."

Kushina eyed him contemplatively. "So? What difference would that make to you?"

"By then I'd had enough time to realize that how ever much it hurt me to lose her I could not defile her memory by returning an abomination in her place. I loved my wife with all my heart; I love her still and hope to see her in the world to come. But when her time on earth had come to its end I accepted that."

Kushina laughed. "You know what I have discovered following all this forced interaction with you mortal worms? That you pathetic human have a truly extraordinary gift for self deception. You spend your entire lives telling yourself whatever lies you find comforting."

Kushina shrugged. "Well I suppose if I were forced to live as a weak and pathetic human I would have to delude myself as well just to make it bearable."

"I need to know..."

Kushina sighed. "I will not harm your son or his companions." She shook her head at his look of surprise. "I can read your mind like a book remember? And to answer the question you want to pose to me, why would I bother seeking revenge on those three? I've already told you, I will lay waste to this village and the camps nearby, and then I am going home. Three little worms are not worthy of my time and I have no reason to seek them out."

Minato nodded. "In that case I will do what you ask. I will help you destroy Konoha."

Minato

Author's Note: This chapter brings the story to an end. While not one of my more popular ones I've noticed from the comments that those of you who liked it seemed to like it a lot. Thank you all for reading and posting and I hope you find the ending satisfying.

"So just how can I release you?" Minato asked.

"Simple mortal," Kushina replied. "You will create an ultimate nullification field that will suppress and eliminate the effect of every jutsu in the area. The range of effect will be about 500 yards. So long as you are anywhere near the snake, all the jutsus he placed upon that wretched gem shall be dispelled and I shall be free." Kushina smiled at him. "Oh, and by the way, the immortality jutsu will also be dispelled at the same instant. You and all the rest of the Circle will die in fire just as Zabuza and Kisame did."

Minato recalled the events and grimaced. "Not the ending I would have chosen, but at least it will be quick. And maybe given the things I have done it's only right I die that way." He thought for a moment. "There is a problem though; if I begin casting a jutsu anywhere near the Hokage the ANBU will be on top of me before I can complete it."

Kushina nodded. "Not to worry." She reached out and put a single finger on his forehead. He instantly felt knowledge filling his mind. A vast and multifaceted scroll formula, one a hundred times more complex than even the Hiraishin. Yet he found that it was committed perfectly to memory. "You can simply write out the formula and use it as a scroll."

"Well that's better," Minato admitted. "But there's still a strong chance that as soon as I pull the scroll out the ANBU will be on me."

"Do not use a paper scroll then fool. Write the formula on your body. Use yourself as the scroll."

Minato slowly nodded. "I think that will work. Then on the night of the festival I will do as you ask."

Kushina laughed merrily. "Good! Then all of Konoha will die in fire!"

It was a beautiful morning. As the four of them walked through the streets people offered polite greetings and made room for them as they always did. Haku was silent as he walked just a step behind Naruto. He had lost his father and been turned on by the village. Having been saved by Naruto he had given all of his loyalty to him. Minato was glad. Naruto would have a devoted friend ready to go through anything for him. Haku could no longer wear the leaf hitai-ite and probably would not have worn one if he could. Around his forehead he had tied a simple piece of white cloth. It hid the numbers that had been put there.

Hinata was walking along in her usual black ninja clothing. She was in a fine mood and did not seem to be upset in the least that she would be missing the festival.

"Hinata."

She looked up at him. "Yes Minato?"

He smiled down at the girl. "I just want you to know that I have always thought you a sweet and kind hearted girl. It pleases me more than you know to see how you love one another. I give you my blessing to be my son's wife and my daughter." He leaned down and gave the surprised girl a kiss on the forehead.

She blushed a deep red and quickly bowed. "Arigato Minato-san!" Those words meant a great deal to her. She didn't understand why he was saying them now. Traditionally the formal blessing was given

just before the wedding. But even if the timing was strange she was very happy to hear him give her his blessing.

At the gates Naruto turned around to send his father a surly look. He was in a poor mood that his own father was forcing him to leave the village on his birthday and on the festival of salvation.

"Well dad I guess I'll see you in a week." He said curtly. He turned around to just go but his father grabbed him and pulled him into an embrace.

"I love you son." Minato whispered to him. "I love you and I am proud of you son. And even if you are angry with me I know that you love me as well."

Naruto looked at his father in complete surprise. Sure he was a little upset but where was all this sudden emotion coming from? He quickly returned his father's hug. "Dad, of course I love you! I've always loved you and I've always been proud to be your son."

Minato nodded and looked into his son's face. Where had the tears come from? Naruto didn't understand. "Son," Minato spoke seriously but in a quiet voice. "I have done many terrible things. Things that I regret and am ashamed of. I have failed you and so many others in the choices that I made and in the things that I did and failed to do. But please believe me son that everything I did I did out of love. It was my love for you and my love for the people of this village that always guided me. I hope that you can forgive me for all the ways I failed you."

"Failed me?" Naruto asked. "Dad you've never failed me ever! Dad you've loved me and been there for me and everything I am I owe to you." He looked into his father's eyes and somehow knew the words that his father wanted to hear. "But, if there was something, then of course I forgive you!" Naruto saw relief fill his father's eyes and a peace enter his face.

"Arigato sochi." Minato whispered.

"Dad what's wrong? Is something going on? Why does this feel like a final goodbye?" Naruto asked worry in his voice. His annoyance of just a few moments ago completely forgotten.

"It's nothing I can explain son. Just let me hold on to you for a little bit before you go."

Naruto nodded and the two of them simply stood there for several minutes embracing. People were beginning to stare but neither of them noticed.

But finally, regretfully, Minato loosened his hold. He had to let him go. He stood back and quickly wiped his eyes. "Ah, sorry about that. I guess I'm growing emotional in my old age." He gave a big smile. "I'll see you when you get back son."

Naruto slowly nodded, not sure what that had been or where his sudden fear had come from. "Dad if you don't want me to go..."

Minato shook his head and laughed a bit. "You're going son! I've got to teach you a lesson after all. I'll see you soon."

All the sorrow seemed to have melted away and his dad seemed in a good mood again. Maybe it was nothing. "All right dad. We'll be back in one week." He began walking away with Hinata and Haku. Looking back over his shoulder he smiled. "Bye dad, I love you."

"I love you too son." Minato stood there rooted to the spot and watched them go. He remained until they were gone from sight.

Live a long and happy life my son. Be the good man that I know you will be and always love and protect those who are precious to you.

He slowly began the long walk back home.

October tenth.

Minato walked calmly through the crowded streets of Konoha. Beneath his sky blue kimono his chest, arms, and legs were covered in letters and symbols. He knew what he would do and was at peace with the decision. As he walked his eyes drank in the scene around him. Every street corner was lit with bright and decorative lanterns. People were walking the streets buzzing with excitement. There seemed to be children everywhere laughing and playing. The children bothered him. They were completely innocent. The only thing that kept his steps steady was the thought that the children of Wind country had been just as innocent.

Standing on top of the Tower he waited with the other Circle members for the Hokage to make his appearance in all his glory. Anko openly glared at him while Itachi was disinterested as usual. He didn't give either of them a second thought. He looked at the other three. Jiraiya who had been his beloved sensei. Kakashi, his prized student whose heart had been torn apart by the tragedies of war. Tsunade, a woman with real strength and courage with a strong sense of right and wrong. Other than Sarutobi she had been the only one with the courage to question the Hokage openly. But her love for her little brother and her husband had been stronger than anything else. They were all good people and dear to his heart. He couldn't blame any of them for the choices they had made. If they were guilty he was as well.

He had thought about inviting them over to his home for a farewell dinner. But sadly had chosen not to. A meeting of four Circle members would certainly draw the notice of the ANBU. There was also the danger of one of them suspecting something and turning him in. The thought that one of them could turn on him broke his heart. But in the world they lived in it had to consider the possibility.

From where he stood he could look out upon the entire village. It had changed some since he was a boy, especially in the last thirteen years. Looking at the cliff and the Yondaime's massive face he could

not deny that the village was not what it had been. He longed for the old Konoha. The village he'd grown up in, where everyone stood together out of devotion to the village, not out of fear. How had things gone so far? It was easy to lay everything at Orochimaru's feet. And indeed he was the one most to blame. But it was an ancient truth that evil could only prosper when good men did nothing. Orochimaru had been alone in carving out his empire. Many had chosen to simply stand aside and do nothing. While others, including himself and everyone on the roof top, had served willingly. They all deserved at least some of the blame for what had happened.

In a large flash of fire the Hokage appeared in his gold and white robes. From below a thunderous cheer and wave of applause rose to greet him. As they always did they fell to a knee and cast their eyes down.

"You may arise and gaze upon me." A happy Orochimaru informed them. "Tonight shall be glorious! And I invite you to all share in my glory."

The others all made some comment but Minato stared at the pale face smiling at them. Thirteen years ago he'd had the power to kill him and prevent all the horrors. But he hadn't fully known the man's true nature. He'd been fooled and thought the Hokage a hero for saving Konoha from the Kyuubi. Then later he'd been too weak, too afraid of losing his son, to fight. But now to save his son he was finally ready to fight. It had always been for Naruto's sake. To protect his son he had committed the blackest of sins. Now to protect him he would make the ultimate sacrifice and bring ruin to his home.

He shut his eyes and remembered his wife sitting with him in the rose garden. He remembered a five year old Naruto playing innocently with Hinata. He remembered returning safely to the village one sunny day with Obito, Kakashi, and Rin trailing behind him. He remembered Jiraiya-sensei showing him a rough draft of a novel and telling him how excited he was about it. He remembered Sarutobi, Tsunade, his parents, his Genin teammates, other teachers, old

friends, and so many people he had cared for over the years. Many of them were long gone, some were standing beside him. But he hoped that every one of them would understand and forgive him. *Kushina, if Kami is more merciful than I deserve then I will see you again. If I do not it is a just punishment for my sins and I pray you can forgive me and then forget. Naruto I love you. Live long and well my beloved son.*

It was time. He poured his chakra into the seal he had written over his skin. The seal activated. His body lit up like a torch and he screamed as he died in fire. His very last thought was of his son.

Orochimaru had just begun his speech when he heard the screams and felt the heat coming from behind him. He turned about to witness his five guests writhing and screaming as they died. But there was another sound that caught his attention. A tiny little, 'crack.'

He grabbed the chain about his neck and pulled out the gem of the kitsune. There was a crack in it. Watching in fascination and in horror the red chakra leaked out like wine from a broken bottle.

"No," Orochimaru whispered. "You cannot do that."

The red chakra solidified around him and Orochimaru found himself helpless within a sphere of the Kyuubi's chakra. More and more chakra was manifesting and taking on physical form. Even as the body was still forming two golden eyes came into being and they seemed to be laughing. In his head he heard the mocking voice.

You should feel honored snaking. You are the only one present who will survive. In fact you shall live a hundred thousand years, I promise you.

The would be god emperor howled in despair as the fox laughed.

The crowds were watching the strange display that had begun just as their Lord was addressing them. They had noted there was a fire but had not actually seen the deaths of the Circle members. They were watching in awe as a gigantic swirl of red chakra was taking shape above them. They all waited with anticipation to see what their Hokage had in mind. He was well known for wondrous displays and he had obviously come up with something amazing. No one was afraid, no one was panicked. They had lived with the Kyuubi's power for so long it did not occur to any of them that anything might go wrong. No one could doubt the Hokage's genius. So no one ran. Not that it would have made any difference. Exactly thirteen years after the Kyuubi's arrival, the day of reckoning had finally come.

Towering above them the red chakra finally began to take a recognizable shape. The shape of a gigantic fox with nine swirling tails. Four legs fell to earth and buildings were flattened beneath them. With the truth finally revealed to them people began screaming. Ninja and citizen alike began running for their lives. The Kyuubi grinned maliciously and breathed in the night air with its sweet fragrance of mortal terror. With a contemptuous swipe of one tail she flattened the Tower. She had regained her freedom at last, and now she would have vengeance.

I AM THE KYUUBI GREAT AND TERRIBLE!!

Opening her jaws she spat out a river of fire that engulfed the village and its people. To those who were still alive it seemed like a vision of hell. It was only the very beginning.

Three hundred miles away Naruto, Hinata, and Haku were lying around a campfire and looking up into a clear night sky. As they lay there they heard a loud crack.

"What was that?" Hinata asked.

Naruto reached into his coat pocket. He pulled out a metal key and broken fragments of crystal. His heart sank. He didn't know why, but

someone he just knew something very bad had happened. "The crystal that was protecting the key broke. My dad told me if that happened to open the chest."

"Will you open it then?" Haku politely asked.

Before he could answer they all noticed the night was suddenly getting brighter. They all stood and stared. On the eastern horizon there was light. Less than a sun but enough to turn night into dusk.

"What is that?" Hinata wondered.

"It must be an extraordinary fire." Haku stated.

Naruto stared at the light and tears came into his eyes. "Dad."

10 years later.

Touzuku was a happy man, life was good. He was the leader of the most powerful bandit force in the central region. In his plate armor he was riding at the head of his two hundred man force. He had two hundred tough and hard minded men ready to do whatever he told them. He had three dozen wagons filled with treasure and with slaves, the spoils of five years of fighting and raiding. He smiled to think how life had changed since the Night of Fire. He'd been nothing then. Just a lowly captain in charge of some remote post in the Kingdom of Konoha. Just one more officer in the Hokage's vast army. Then in one night Konoha had burned and the world had changed in an instant. No more Hokage, no more Kingdom of Konoha, no more army, no more central authority, and no more ninjas.

Not every ninja had died of course. There were always leaf nins on patrol back then and there had been a handful still free in Lightning, Grass, and a few other places. Some of the, 'Leaf' nins were foreign born and with the Hokage's death had deserted to return home. The loyal ones returned to fire country and tried to find a home. With

Konoha and its army gone every lord and major city declared independence and tried to fill the power vacuum. Throughout the ninja lands there were perhaps 400, 'countries.' The number changed every week. There were perhaps 50 of so Daimyos and even a couple emperors. They were all powerful lords with great ambitions, but all of them could only rule as far as their troops could reach. The ninja lands were swallowed up in chaos and filled with strife.

Along with the Daimyos there were still, 'Kages' and, 'ninja villages.' Wherever a handful of ninjas came together they formed a village and its leader was a Kage. There were seven in the world. But none of them were Jonin from what he could tell from the stories. And none of them commanded more ninja than you could count in a single hand. In the whole world he guessed there might be a hundred ninjas still left. Along with most ninjas dying most of their jutsus had died as well. The Hokage had forbidden ninja scrolls to exist anywhere but in Konoha. Most of the world's knowledge of the ninja arts had been concentrated in Konoha and of course gone up in flames. So the few ninjas who remained were but a shadow of what they had once been. Many people took it for granted that the time of ninjas was over. It was a new age.

In this wonderful new age were opportunities for men with the strength and courage to take advantage of them. After the Night of Fire he'd hired on with a small northern lord as the captain of his guard. Then five years ago he's come to the realization he was risking his life for the ambitions of a weak idiot. He'd killed the man and sacked his palace. He'd been a bandit leader ever since. He'd been traveling slowly southward acquiring followers, treasure, and slaves as he went. He avoided large cities and those lords who actually had strong forces. He went after the weak and his success had been constant. Now he'd come to some new territory in the central region. There were supposed to be several prosperous small towns in the area. There was also said to be a ninja village, but with two hundred well equipped men riding with him that was no worry.

As they came around a bend in the road he saw a lone figure standing before him. He was a young man with a fair complexion and spiky blonde hair. He had on black pants, a white shirt and a dark green vest over that. Touzuku signaled a halt and the column came to a stop. About a dozen of his men moved their horses out to either side of him. The stranger was just standing there calmly looking them over.

Touzuku laughed. "You have *got* to be a ninja. Any sane man would have made a run for it."

The blonde nodded. "I am a ninja. In fact I am a Kage." That brought a round of laughter. "Did I say something funny?"

Touzuku nodded. "Oh it's just that I've killed four Daimyos but never a Kage before. So how many ninjas in your village? Three, four?"

"Counting me?"

"Sure, why not?"

"We have seventy eight ninjas in the village of Minato. That's not counting the academy students."

There was another loud burst of laughter. "Oh stop!" Touzuku roared between belly laughs. "Sure, and the next thing you're going to tell me is that they're all hidden in the trees there waiting to attack us."

He shook his head. "No, I'm here alone. I'm here to let you know that the town up ahead is under my protection and the protection of my village. What exactly are your intentions?"

Touzuku smiled and calmly drew his sword. His men saw this and readied spears and lances. "I plan to sack it, take anything I want, and burn the rest."

The blonde frowned. "I won't let that happen."

"Let me guess," Touzuku said. "You, all by yourself, plan to slaughter me and all my men with your great ninja skills."

"That's right."

Touzuku shook his head. "There are idiots out there who would believe that. But I've fought ninja before. A really good one might be a match for five armed men, I've got two hundred."

The blonde shook his head. "Sounds to me like you ran into a few half assed Genin. Don't compare me to some raw untrained ninja. I am the Kage of the ninja village of Minato. I could handle five thousand or more without trouble."

Touzuku looked to the men on either side of him and winked at them. "Five thousand, huh? Sounds like I'm in trouble."

The blonde could see they were getting ready to charge their horses. He sighed. "I gave you your warning." He ran through some hand signs. " **Hiraishin no Jutsu.**"

The last thing Touzuku ever saw was the blonde ninja disappear. A flash of yellow appeared and he tumbled from his saddle his throat sliced open.

In less than thirty seconds two hundred men lay in the dirt road dead or dying.

A few hours later Naruto and about two hundred and thirty clones were leading a large train of horses and wagons into the village of Minato. The slaves had decided to accept his offer of residence in his village. They were mostly women and thought being protected by such a powerful ninja a good idea. Had they declined his offer they would have been free to go. The horses, weapons, armor, and treasure Naruto had brought in would go into the village's treasury. As he returned he was approached by one of the members of the council and a clan head.

Hyuga Neji frowned. "Kage-sama," he gave his lord a deep bow. "I wish you would stop going out on patrol alone. You insist everyone else go in teams of two."

"Oh come on Neji. It'd be a waste to make anyone have to put up with me for a whole patrol."

Neji sighed and shook his head. "What would happen to the village if we somehow lost you?"

Naruto smiled as though the answer was obvious. "You would choose a new Kage and keep going. I'm not indispensable, no one here is. The village would survive without me. Now if you'll excuse me I want to see my family. Are you, Tenten and little Hizashi and Hiashi coming over tomorrow night?"

Neji nodded, it was clear to him that his Kage would not listen about his own safety. "Yes Kage-sama."

Naruto still smiled as he turned to leave. "Any chance of you just calling me Naruto?"

"When we are in private I shall call you that, in public it would be disrespectful Kage-sama."

Naruto nodded and walked away, that was about the answer he'd expected. As he walked the dirt streets of his sprawling village people greeted him with honest smiles and waves. These he was happy to return. As Kage he *led* his people he did not rule over them. Power was carefully shared between not only him and the council but by the Assembly. A group of thirty chosen by the votes of *everyone* in the village whether ninja or citizen. All three groups had some authority and none could overwhelm the others. It sometimes made getting things done a little harder and a bit slower, but it protected against abuse of power.

Following the Night of Fire he'd opened the chest and found a ten pound gold bar, a small velvet sack filled with diamonds, a scroll, and

a letter. The letter was a confession and a last farewell from his father. It explained what he had done and why and asked for forgiveness. Haku had understood while Hinata had wept at the loss of her family, especially her mother and little sister. But she too came understand why it had been done and also had forgiven Minato. Naruto made a decision that night. He burned the letter and the three of them swore a blood oath to never speak of it again, not even to each other, not even on their death beds. Naruto knew that many would hate his father for what he had done and so he had acted to protect his memory. Together the three of them had decided to found a new village on the very lands his father had sent them to. And they named the village in his honor.

Over the years they had gone out looking for survivors to join them. They had found Neji and his squad a couple years later. They had discovered Shizune, Tsunade's old apprentice; apparently she had not wanted to celebrate the festival and taken a short vacation that had saved her. As time passed more and more of the surviving ninjas had either been recruited or sought them out. The village that the three of them had originally founded grew by leaps and bounds. It had also regained many of the old clans; Hyuga, Namikaze, Inuzuka, Nara, Yamanaka, and Akimichi. Sadly there were no more Uchihas and other noble lines such as the Aburame and Sarutobi were gone. Haku had established the Momichi clan and so new and old mixed together. The scroll his father had provided had proved more valuable than the gold and diamonds. The jutsus in the scroll were copied and put into a ninja library that all ninjas from the village could study at. Naruto had been careful to keep a few of the techniques; shadow clones, rasengan, and Hiraishin out of the general access. Those would be Namikaze clan techniques.

From the beginning Naruto had fought to take the best of the old Konoha his father had told him stories about and learn from the worst. The main lesson was that no one person could become too powerful, and **no one** could be above the law. If the Kage committed a crime the Assembly could strip him of his office and put him on trial. And no one could be punished with out a trial. Naruto had to

admit this made his job harder at times as he couldn't threaten people with death or banishment. But it was a price he was willing to pay if it meant no Kage in Minato would ever become a tyrant. Naruto had also made another radical change in the policy of his village as opposed to Konoha's. They had enough ninja to be able to conquer all the nearby villages and towns. They didn't. Instead they offered union with other villages as equals. If a town or village wished to join them they could. Once they joined their people became citizens with the exact same rights as those living in Minato. Including the right to vote for or be members of the Assembly. They paid the same taxes and had to follow the same laws. And once they joined the union they could not leave it. But in return they were given protection. Unlike Konoha the village of Minato was expanding through a deliberate policy of peace and justice. The village had grown from three to ten thousand and boasted a public school system, ninja academy, library, hospital, and more. Naruto was proud of what he and others had built here and would continue to work hard to make his village and new nation continue to grow.

Approaching his home he opened the door and boomed out. "Daddy's home!" Immediately his three children squealed in delight and rushed to greet him. His sons Minato and Saru and his daughter Hanabi all piled on to him. "Help!" he cried out with laughter.

"Is everything all right in here?" His beautiful Hinata entered the living room smiling at the chaos before her. Her belly was showing as she was five months along with their fourth child. Shizune assured her the child was healthy.

Naruto smiled. "Everything is just fine honey." A little sadness touched him as he thought of his father and what he'd done. Everything they had was due to his choice and his sacrifice. How Naruto wished his father was still there to see his grandchildren

Thank you dad, I love you and may you rest always in peace now.

THE END

Author's Note

Author's Note: This is to let those of you who are fans of this story know I've decided to write a sequel picking up right where this one left off. It will be a much lighter tale centering on the efforts of Naruto and a few others to keep the village of Minato headed in the right direction. I am not sure when I will start but all of you who have this story on alert, I will post a new chapter whenever it comes out.

Sequel

To all those of you who are interested the sequel has now been posted. It is called, The Great and Terrible: The Emperor's War. Please do not post any review here.